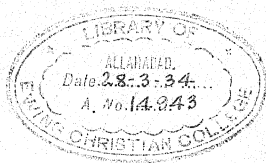


THE MYSTERY OF THE FLAMING HUT

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PART I

THE MYSTERY OF THE FLAMING HUT

CHAPTER I

A THIN sector of lamplight from the open hut door barely pierced the hot, heavy darkness of the tropical evening. The creak of a chair under the uneasy, restless occupant, a gleaming cigarette end, or the clink of a glass, were the sole signs that a West African drink party was in progress.

Heavy steps sounded on gravel and came to an uncertain halt.

"Chair behind you, sir. I was hoping you'd come." Someone rose in the darkness, with apparent reluctance. "Let me give you a whiskey."

"Thanks, Culver. Whiskey and soda's just what I need." Winchester, the Mine Manager, leant his shotgun against the back of a deck chair, and stood for a moment in the faint beam of yellow light. A bulky figure, even in his shooting kit of flannel shirt and khaki shorts, he slung his sun-helmet on the footrest of the chair, and, pulling a handkerchief from his hip pocket, mopped his hairy chest and the back of his neck.

Culver's arm, shirt-sleeve rolled to the elbow, stretched out into the light to work the sparklet bottle on the low table, then disappeared again into the darkness. Winchester, glass in hand, groped backwards. The creak of a chair beneath his weight indicated that he had come safely to mooring.

"Whew . . . !" Winchester's long sigh showed relief

and appreciation. "It's been a scorcher, even for West Africa. I really shouldn't be here, sopping up your whiskey like this. You're supposed to be coming up for drinks and Christmas dinner with the Missus and myself." His voice was cheerily apologetic. "But if you *will* put your drink table right on the edge of the path . . . ! Here's to you and your coming marriage!"

"Good luck!" Culver raised unseen glass in reply. "Mind having no light, sir? The sandflies are a perfect curse, and the lamp attracts 'em."

"Not a bit. Seems cooler without it. I've been chasing the wily guinea-fowl all the way from Number Two Paddock to Goshin Dutsi. You know the way the damned birds run . . .," even now Winchester sounded irritated. "It was the same flock I followed all the way, I swear. In the end I headed them, but the blighters scuttled up the gentle western slope of Goshin Dutsi. I got to the top just in time to see them drop off the precipice, on the north side over the river, and plane back to the spot we'd started from! Didn't get a shot, but did get the hell of a grilling from the sun."

"Nice seasonable weather for Christmas." A drawling, yet decisive voice came through the hot darkness. "Dust storms instead of snow-storms, the ground iron-hard with drought instead of frost, the sun overhead white-hot and torturin' every living thing . . . But here's to West Africa and the blitherin' fools like us that live in it!"

"Hullo, Paige-Thomas, when did you ride in? I wasn't expecting you for another week yet, till I got your note yesterday. You must have hurried. Who else is hidden over there?" Winchester's chair creaked again as he bent forward and down to catch their outlines against the faintly

visible horizon. "That you Kartel? . . . Marren? . . . I can see five or six of you. Hope you're all coming to our Christmas dinner, whoever you are."

There were several polite murmurs of assent.

"I'd better introduce myself. This patch of thirst, sweat and sandflies is me, Balance." A match scraped and flamed as the speaker lit a foully gurgling pipe. A beaky nose stood out, emphasised in the glow, and the lower lids blinked, bird-like, in front of unusually dark eyes. "I overtook Paige-Thomas on the road about an hour away from here, and we rode in together. The horseboy with your invitations met us at the cross-roads. Awfully kind of you to ask a stranger in like this."

"Not a bit. The more the merrier! I was in the office sending off the note to P.T. when Culver reminded me that our new District Officer, Balance by name, was due to pass through here to-day by the same road. So . . .," the manager's genial boom was drowned for the moment by the gurgle of the sparklet bottle. "Dinner to-night is also a farewell party to Culver's bachelor days. To-morrow he starts down-country to meet the future Mrs. Culver when the home mail-boat docks at Lagos."

"Congratulations." Balance's voice was cordial but lacked enthusiasm.

From the darkness of Culver's knees, the white nose of a terrier poked up into the beam of yellow light, gave a squeaky little yawn, and was once more lost to sight. The identity disk on his collar jingled as he scratched, then with a deep sigh he stretched out to sleep again.

A murmur of conversation came from two invisible guests, a background of sound that lessened, became intermittent, and sank into languid silence. As the evening

brought relief from the palpable pressure of the day's heat, the little group of exiles relaxed, nerves ceased to jangle. A bird chirred somewhere out in the night. The sound of a bat flitting by, and the rustle of the ever-present white-ants in the thatching of Culver's single-roomed mud hut formed an undercurrent to thought. A glass clinked startlingly through the darkness, and Culver spluttered over his drink, choked a moment, then laughed.

"Sorry, you fellows. I was thinking of our Olaf Olafson. He started his Christmas celebrations two days ago, and at eleven this morning, judging by his remarks, thought he was a Chinese General. In full uniform too—which, by the way, consisted of a gray flannel shirt, rather short, his long beard, and a pair of native sandals. Also an empty beer bottle." The speaker chuckled at the recollection, and the terror on his lap gave a bored sigh.

"He didn't recognise me, but knocked the bottom off the bottle on a stone, and came at me with the jagged remains. So I turned myself into a rapidly retreating hostile army. No faster retreat was ever carried out. Olafson saw to that."

The picture drew indolent grunts of amusement from the invisible audience.

Winchester leaned forward, bringing his wrist-watch into the faint light. "Sorry, Culver. I must hurry off. I suppose some of you have changed already? . . . Nobody? Good. Then we'll all be late together. Except Balance who has to ride down to his rest-house and back. We'll save a spot of food and drink for you, Balance." Heavily jocular, the Manager groped for his gun and helmet.

Chairs scraped, and feet crunched on the gravel as others stood up to go. Culver accompanied the party along the

few yards of path that led to the Manager's driveway.

"Anyone got time for just another drink? Anyone need a lamp to find their way? Well it's clear going and no ditches. See you all later!" He turned back to his now deserted hut as the footsteps and voices receded through the darkness.

Winchester's booming laugh, Paige-Thomas's lower tones came clearly to him through the dry, hot air. The clatter of hoofs showed that the District Officer had found his horse and waiting horseboy and was hurrying home to his rest-house on the outskirts of the native village. Nearby, the terrier's claws scraped on the canvas of a vacant chair, a cooler seat than his master's lap.

Culver's face showed in the lamplight as, standing before the low table, he bent down and lifted the whiskey bottle, and stood for a moment irresolute. Then his puffy face with its weak, smiling mouth, hardened to an appearance of decision as he replaced the bottle beside the still empty glass. With hasty step he entered the mud hut. A tin trunk clanged as the lid fell, and he came out carrying a flat paper-wrapped parcel. Carefully he moved the small table out of the way, and dragged a chair into the beam of lamplight.

From beyond the tennis court came the scent of Winchester's cookfire, and the sudden sound of native voices raised in loud argument. The usual cook-house squabble, probably. A shout from Winchester cut it short.

In the ray of lamplight from the hut door, the ribbon round the Christmas package bore signs of having been tied and untied many times before. But to-day was Christmas day, and in the absence of a knife the flame of a match served to sever the silk fastening. It also set fire to the

wrapping. With a gasp of anxiety Culver quenched the smoulder under the flat of his hand. Freed from the wrappings, a photographer's folder came to view. His hands trembled as he opened this and lifted the tissue sheet which covered the photograph.

The cynical terrier gave another squeaky yawn. More lights appeared in the Manager's house. Footfalls on the Manager's drive caught Culver's attention, and he looked out into the darkness. As they drew nearer, crunched on the newly spread laterite gravel of the path, he put the picture reluctantly aside on the table at his elbow and rose.

"You've changed quickly! Let me pour you a whiskey." Hospitably he made a move towards the table. "Then I'll have to bolt indoors and do a rapid washdown and dress myself."

"Thanks very much." The visitor sank into a chair in the darkness beyond the fan of light. "I had bathed and changed before I came here the first time. All but the boiled shirt and choker. Really came back for a talk before you leave for Lagos tomorrow. Whoa! . . . Leave a little room for the soda to balance on top! Aren't you drinking?"

Culver refilled a glass from the table. "Now that I think of it, I shan't need much time to change. I sent the boy off with my loads this morning, so can't get a bath."

The visitor struck a match. "I seem to have got your glass." He passed it across and took his own. "Here's to your last day on the Mine . . . as a bachelor!"

"Thanks!" Culver raised his glass in reply and drank.

Neither spoke. From the hot darkness came the creak of the visitors' shirt-front keeping time with his breathing. He set his glass down, and the creaking seemed to accelerate slightly.

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Culver's glass clinked as it fell to the gravel. "I think I'd better" Slowly he rose, with obvious effort, his hands pressing heavily upon the arms of his chair. His feet were lagging and he swayed as he walked towards the hut to dress.

A moment, the beam of light broadened and he was back in the doorway, lamp in hand. Bewilderment in his eyes.

"Can you give me a hand I'm I can't," the slurring voice shook, rose weakly in fright.

"I can't . . ." a high, strained whisper. "I can't . . ."
The chairs were empty.

Mouth open, eyes staring, he clung to the doorway. The lamp fell with a crash. Slowly his knees gave way.

Then came a duller, heavier thud.

The head of the fox-terrier poked enquiringly over the arm of a chair.

*you do
not know*

CHAPTER II

IN a country where transport costs limit most white men to homes built of local material with mud walls and thatched roofs, Winchester's house was luxurious, almost pretentious. Of red brick and cement, it spread bungalow-fashion on a gentle rise within convenient distance of the Mafun Mining Company's central offices.

One disadvantage was apparent on Christmas night. The brick walls, and corrugated iron roof, despite the thick layers of native matting laid upon the latter, had soaked up the sun's blazing heat throughout the day. The casement windows, stretching almost from floor to rafter round three sides of the dining-room, seemed unable to exhaust its oven-like atmosphere. The concrete floor, black-stained, polished, so superior in appearance to the usual pot-holed mud floor, felt hot as a stove top. Even the furniture, of dark red local hardwood, had absorbed in its massive frames the day's heat, and now, from its smooth, waxed surfaces, added its contribution to discomfort.

At one end of the long room a bar had been fitted up. A bar, complete even to brass rail, and old-fashioned lithographs of pink-faced, luscious damsels advertising drinks and tobacco. On the further side of the counter were two native boys in linen uniforms with gold-coloured cummerbunds and turbans. A group had already gathered round the bar, where Winchester, one foot on the brass rail, handed out drinks, and told the gruesome type of story that seemed his favourite brand of humour.

Host and hostess must have spent both time and money on the gala decorations. On the long table at the other end of the room stood an imitation Christmas tree of imposing size, covered with ornaments, and absurd childish gifts. Overhead, paper festoons, artificial holly and mistletoe and Chinese lanterns waved to the slow pendulum-swing of the punkah.

Winchester gestured, cheroot in hand, towards the doorway. "Come in, Balance. Send your horse round to the back where he'll get a stable and a feed. You've been quick. The others have only just arrived."

John Balance, a vaguely seen figure on the verandah, handed hat and gloves to his horseboy, and murmured instructions. His evening clothes with dinner jacket emphasised the youthful lines of his short, slight body as he hesitated in the doorway. The tan on his clear-cut features seemed as dark as old saddle-leather in the close contrast with his stiff, white collar and gleaming shirt-front.

"This is Balance, our new District Officer, whom I've kidnapped from his duties and persuaded to dine with us." With one hand the Manager drew him up to the bar, with the other equipped him with a glass of gin and bitters. "Now you can introduce yourselves, and for the Lord's sake help yourself to drinks. The Missus will be in shortly, and then we'll eat."

Balance looked around him with interest. He had met none of these men, except Paige-Thomas, in the light. It had been dark, or gathering dusk, when most of them had rolled in to drink with Culver.

Winchester, burly, genial, red-faced with grizzled hair, might have been a land-owning farmer in the Shires but for an incongruous touch of dandyism, a white waistcoat

which he wore after the Prince of Wales' manner.

No one here had a beard. So Olafson must still be under the weather. Rotten the way West Africa got you in your weak spot,—drink, women, insomnia or whatever it might be, and made you worse. It sounded as if drink was Olafson's trouble.

Paige-Thomas he had summed up already. In dinner-jacket outfit now, like everyone else. But his unusual height and loose-limbed movement gave his clothes an appearance of casual elegance. The scar on his left temple showed up against the tan he had brought back from his recent prospecting trip. A star prospector and mining engineer, with a wonderful war record, it seemed, though he appeared the careless dilettante.

Bennerton, now. Pale hair, pink face, nervously loud and aggressive, then awkward and apologetic. Callow—that would be a fair summary of him. Very young in comparison with those others, most of whom had borne the strain of war and prolonged residence in the Tropics. But, poor devil, he was beginning to pay already. Jerky hands, the tense frown and bitten lips of jangled nerves. The others had all gone through it, of course, and come out the other side with their appearances more or less under control, but with Lord knows what weird mental kinks hidden below. "Mental kinks"—what was it the psychologists called them?

"About four o'clock the company cooks opened the sandbags in which the rations were brought up to the line." Winchester was telling one of his yarns, mopping his face occasionally with a silk handkerchief. "You know the way sandbags were used for everything from burials to extra under-pants that first year? A wonder any were left for

parapets. None of us got any Christmas dinner that night. But there was the hell of a row over it." He waved his cheroot butt, then shook the ash off his white waistcoat. "One sandbag looks exactly like another, which accounts for them getting exchanged. Well, the cooks opened the sandbags and we realised that the Padre had buried our rations that afternoon by mistake."

The story was well received, though Bennerton looked a little sick, and swilled a drink with indecent speed. That squat, pock-marked man—the dredge-master wasn't he?—slapped his thigh with gusto, and spilt beer down his shirt. Lived ten miles east of the main camp, beside the artificial lake on which his machinery floated. Wouldn't be likely to wear his evening shirt till he next dined with the Manager and Mrs. Winchester. Plenty of time to wash the beer-stains off. He . . .

"Look! What's that blaze?" Paige-Thomas's shout made them jump. "Culver's house, isn't it?"

Even while they crushed to the windows, the glare on the further side of the tennis-court shot higher.

There was a moment's pause. Then Paige-Thomas, first to notice the red glow, was first too into action. A mat went slithering across the polished floor as he dived through the doorway.

A chair crashed over. They jammed in the narrow opening, stumbled and jumped down the unlit verandah steps. Winchester shouted back to the boys to bring water. Objects showed red, or in black silhouette against the blaze. Pungent smoke lay in the air, met their labouring lungs as they ran.

Mrs. Winchester, it must have been—a woman in black evening dress—met them in the drive, rushed towards them.

Pointlessly, unheeded, she called to them, "Hurry! Oh, hurry! Save him. Oh, please save . . ." and something more that they did not catch as they pounded past her down towards the glare. One of the party fell headlong over the whitewashed boulders edging the ditch, but no one stopped. The oleander trees round the tennis-court stood out in black outline against the crackling blaze.

Led by Winchester they charged a hedge of henna, stumbled, but were through. Blinded by the glare they nearly crashed into the wire netting of the tennis-court, rounded that, and came into the open by the burning hut. Smoke and heat slowed them to a walk, to an uncertain halt with hands and black sleeves trying to protect their eyes and faces. Driven back, scorched, they gave way pace after pace, reluctantly, impotently. Sobbing, Mrs. Winchester darted towards the doorway: sobbing she was driven back.

The blazing house was impossible to approach. The grass roof, dried to tinder by months of drought, flamed like stick-cordite. The mud walls appeared already red-hot in the vivid glow. Through the open doorway nothing could be seen but smoke and an intense incandescence which left the eyes dry and burning. Culvert's fox-terrier with frantic whines ran in and out among the group.

The smoke, curling heavily under the lintel, burst into a blaze. Then people saw something dark, sprawled just inside the doorway. With an oath, with a groan, the helpless onlookers woke from their temporary stupor.

Winchester stumbled forward, his left elbow up to protect his face and hurled an ineffectual bucket of water, then another, towards the body in the doorway. Balance dragged up the tennis net, hastily unthreading its copper cable. The loop of it hit the doorway and fell short. Cast again, it

caught for a moment, then came away with a button, smouldering cloth, and a flap of sizzling skin.

More water was hurled. The terrier sprang forward with a growl to protect his master. As he did so the lintel and a corner of the wall fell upon him, pinning him within a yard of that furnace-like doorway. Trapped by the blazing lintel square across his back, he had time for one scared yelp before a bucket of water drenched him.

Balance and Paige-Thomas leapt forward. Paige-Thomas lifting the blazing lintel-post as Balance grabbed the small dog and swung him clear. Then both dived back to safety, clothes smouldering, eyebrows singed and eyelashes gone.

Burning grass stems sailed up into the sky like fireworks, till they were lost to sight. Like chattering machine guns the bamboo rafters crackled and exploded. With faint moaning sounds the woman would dart towards the doorway. Held off by the impenetrable heat she would skirt the burning hut as though in search of other entry, then be driven back, whimpering with hopelessness and fear. Moth-like she fluttered up to the blaze, and singed, retreated again. The breeze caused by the fire's updraught whirled her skirt turning the black lace with its golden lining into moth-like wings. With a curse Winchester grabbed and held her.

Suddenly the hut seemed to explode. Flames shot high into the air, burning masses sailed still further skywards. All was over. The roof had fallen in.

Yelling, with petrol cans of water and headpans of sand, lanterns waving, a mob of labourers panted up from the lines, but too late.

CHAPTER III

OF a sudden Balance was awake and listening. Strange bed, strange bedroom, and in the dark. The Manager's guest room. Of course. He remembered now.

Somebody else was in the room too. Somebody who remained silent, motionless. The terrier's nose, which a moment ago had been resting on the D.O.'s ankle, was lifted, and pointed at some object in the darkness. With silent caution Balance raised his head till both ears were clear of the pillow, listened, and tried to guess from which direction the attack would come.

This was not his first midnight visitor. There had been primitive hillmen who had resented his interference with tribal feuds, with human sacrifice, with cannibalism. There had been Mohammedans, and Christians too, who had found in his enforcement of the law grounds for the bitterest enmity. Had been known to bear a grudge against the District Officer, even to the sharpening of knives and poisoning of arrow-heads.

Nothing could be heard. It was too dark to see. When he had accepted Winchester's invitation to stay the night, why hadn't he sent to the rest house for pistol and electric torch at the same time as his pyjamas and washing tackle? That carelessness was likely to cost him at least a knife-wound.

The D.O. breathed carefully and tried to catch any faint odour; wriggled his nostrils, and tried again. The better class of Mohammedan smells of perfume, just as Europeans

and Hillmen do of tobacco. Professional burglars use a special kind of torch, made of the fibre of a certain palm tree, which gives off a faint glow, and can be used as a dark lantern. It also has a clearly recognisable aromatic smoke. Cut-throats and really desperate housebreakers come naked, thickly smeared with grease. This makes them as hard to catch and hold as a greased pig. As they usually carry a razor-sharp machete, naked as themselves, they are the dread of unarmed householders. But their grease, too, gives warning to the wakeful, being vegetable or animal fat, and odorously rancid.

No smell here but his own singed hair and moustache, and terrier-smell both singed and usual. Culver's terrier.

"*Bature*—whiteman!" Surely it was a child's voice that whispered to him? Strange! That had never happened before. Could it be a trick of some kind?

He could feel the waggle of the dog's stumpy tail. But he might be one of those over-friendly animals that greeted friends and strangers with equal enthusiasm.

"*Bature!*" the soft treble came again.

Silently Balance lifted the mosquito net, made ready to spring. Lit a match, and glanced swiftly around him. As swiftly his pose relaxed. Lighting the candle by his bedside, he slid his feet to the ground and sat up.

One arm stretched out to steady herself by the doorway, stood a startled little girl, her head-dress askew, the silver necklace on her bare, brown chest rising and falling with her quick breathing.

As Balance looked, the child's mouth opened in fright. Her toes turned in, ready for a swift about face and retreat by the way she had come. But a kicking cocoon of dog and mosquito net, now disentangled itself. The terrier raced

across the floor to greet the small intruder.

"You, Maitumbi, little fat one! Then I do not fear." She spoke in Hausa and knelt down to hold the licking, wriggling Maitumbi closely to her. "And do you have no fear!" She looked in wide-eyed seriousness at the puzzled, white man. "For we will not harm you, Maitumbi and I."

"I do not fear, but am weary. Tell me what you wish, and then return in the morning, and with your mother. For it is not fitting that small children should wander alone in the night."

"I came to speak with you." She sat back on her heels and straightened her head-dress. "I am not a small child. I am Hatasu. Moreover, I have no home and no mother."

Having satisfactorily disposed of mere masculine irrelevancies, Hatasu obviously felt the way was clear for business.

"If it is permitted, oh Whiteman"

"Balance is my name, Ba-lanss."

"Ba-lanss, Ba-lanss," the child repeated the name. Then nodded grave approval. "The name is good, Ba-lanss, not such as some whitemen have, which twist the mouth as red pepper, or as the juice of the bitter gourd. Now I will come closer, so that we may speak of big matters, you and I, which others must not hear."

The palm-leaf matting on the floor rustled under her bare feet as she rose and walked to the bedside; the terrier following her. The scent of indigo came to Balance, as she redispersed the folder cloth worn shawl-fashion over her thin shoulders, and sank comfortably on the floor into a pose that would have dislocated the joints of a grown up.

"To-night I danced the Clapping Dance, the *Gatan Mata*, in the village. When I came through the dark, returning, your red-robed police circled the house where

Kalava my whiteman had been. They would not let me pass, but from a distance I smelt the burning, and saw by the light of their lanterns ashes everywhere. Saw too the boots of Kalava, much burnt, under the tarpaul' that covered him."

So this was the strange little foundling of whom his police had told him; the native child whom Culver for some freakish reason had taken pity on—might almost be said to have adopted. Balance reached for his inevitable pipe, for a handful of tobacco from his trousers pocket, and prepared to listen.

"Then I cried because of his death. And cried again that Maitumbi here was dead. Moreover, those that watched would not let me stay with my Kalava till daylight brought thought."

The mouth beneath the snub nose began to waver distressingly, and the large dark eyes blinked moistly. Balance swallowed in sympathy and looked away.

"Do not be angry," the scanty awning-striped loin cloth was serving to put a finishing touch to eyes and nose.

Balance sought and found some chocolate biscuits which Winchester had insisted on leaving in case he felt hungry during the night, since no one had been able to eat much at dinner. A happy inspiration. The funny, doll-like person munched and seemed comforted.

"The *dogaris*—your policemen—said that Maitumbi still lived, though hurt and burned." With graceful fingers she ruffled the singed fur on the terrier's back, "But I see it is no hurt, no burn that matters. Then one said that Maitumbi was with the whiteman called *Shajo* 'the hawk' who slept for this night in the house of the Manager. So I made as though to return to the village, but in the dark

crept back to the house of the Manager. Though fearing, fearing so that I shook."

In graphic emphasis her small, right hand pressed to her body beneath her still unmoulded left breast. Bare to the waist as is the custom for unmarried girls, her heart could almost be seen to beat inside the small body. Balance noted the world-wide woman's gesture and nodded his understanding.

"Entering, I first came to the room of a man who snored, where also was a woman who cried, sobbing quietly as one who would not be heard. She cried as a white woman doubtless cries, not as we do. So I knew this to be the room of the wife of the Manager, and her man the Manager it was who snored. Seeking further, and, *kai!* I feared!" Again that womanly gesture, hand pressing to still the beating heart. "I came at last to *Shafu* the hawk. Even without Maitumbi I should know you, for your legs are the thin legs of a bird, and your nose is as the beak of a hawk!" Hastily the whiteman drew his bare legs into the bed. He was a little sensitive about them. Tropical pyjamas are usually sleeveless and legless.

"Even so, coming in the dark I should not have known. But like a rich trader Tumbi wheezes in his sleep—the little fat one!"

Children are difficult witnesses. The District Officer was tired and knew he had an unusually heavy day before him. But the girl was summing him up, weighing him for some purpose of her own whilst she talked. She had some definite purpose in her adventurous search, but until she had tested and approved him he would not be allowed to hear it. It seemed advisable to let her approach her object in her own way. Gravely Balance nodded his understanding.

"Among the people they call you *Shafu*—hawk—because as if from the sky you strike, killing or taking captive, and are gone again. You have killed many men?"

Balance considered. Not many men actually by his own hand and in self-defence. But indirectly, in his various official capacities, he must have sent quite a large number of people to their well-deserved fates.

"Twenty perhaps. Thirty perhaps. Not more." Conscientiously he answered the question. "Tell me what you came to say. For I am weary as the fish that walked to market, and your eyelids droop with sleep."

"If you have killed much, it is good! For it is said 'Ask a tailor about sewing, but a farmer concerning crops,' and I would ask you about the killing of my Kalava." Hatasu's voice was becoming drowsy. She rolled over on her side and cuddled the terrier to her.

Balance's glance rested for a moment on two glasses, a whiskey bottle, and other articles now covered with a clean face towel.

"But perhaps the fire caught him? Perhaps no one killed him?"

"Perhaps!" One dark eye opened, and looked up at him over the twitching ear of the dog. Then closed again contentedly. "So I, too, will tell people. But since neither of us believe this, to-morrow we will find the killer . . . you and I."

Propped on one elbow, Balance of the hawk-like face and reputed stony heart looked down upon the sleeping waif. Of course she shouldn't be here. He would send her away at once. Call one of the servants and get the boy's wife to look after her. Absurd, her being here! Very cautiously, so that the camp bed should not creak, he got out and took

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off his sheet. He could spread his singed dinner jacket over himself if it got cold. Carefully he covered the pair of sleepers. Maitumbi grunted and twitched a paw but the child did not stir.

Wonder what information she had, that made her so sure her "Kalava" had been murdered? Or did even a small scrap of a woman like that believe in her feminine "intuition?" Anyway it was absurd for her to come here like this. He must call a servant at once.

Cautiously he stepped over the pair, and cursed silently in two languages when the bed creaked and threatened to wake them. It must have taken courage to come straight in search of an avenger! Balance blew out the candle and tucked in his mosquito net. Though weary as the fish that walked to market it was some time before he slept.

CHAPTER IV

"HULLO Balance! You're out bright and early." Winchester's voice was less hearty than yesterday. Lack of sleep and a "morning after" head might account for it. "Rotten business, Culver's death. Exactly twelve hours ago we were here taking drinks with him, just where I'm standing now."

"Rotten luck! There's not much left of his gear, but I thought I'd come out and make a list and plan of the remnants before they were cleared away." Balance, standing inside the wrecked circle of mud wall that had been Culver's hut, moved his feet, and a cloud of fine, white ash potholed up into the dazzling sunlight of early morning.

The Manager lit a cheroot and leant over the wall to examine the diagram of the hut and its contents that Balance held. "Very painstaking of you. But it won't help now. Do you realise that if you'd ridden up the drive about two minutes later than you did last night you'd have spotted the fire, and Culver would have been alive still?"

"Don't think so. Might have saved some of his kit and furniture, but Culver" Balance folded his notebook and gave an order to the tall, red-robed policeman who stood by, then turned again to the Manager. "Do you mind my having the remains of Culver's things put in that empty tin-store where we carried his body last night? I've already had his drink table and chairs stored there. I want to look them over before the inquest."

"Certainly use the tin-store. I'm very grateful for your help in putting Culver's affairs in order. But . . . Inquest . . . My dear man, we don't need any Inquest! I'm the Manager of this Mine and responsible for its employees. If any explanations are needed I can give them. A death among white people in this country isn't so rare as to call for an enquiry—Inquest, whatever you call it?" Winchester drew himself up importantly, tried to brush some marks off the sleeve of his white linen jacket, and gestured with his cheroot stub. "It's perfectly clear what happened. The poor devil got caught in the fire. Burned to death. He was probably drunk."

The District Officer vaguely rubbed a singed eyebrow and appeared to be thinking. "When you came in from shooting last night, did you notice where the lamp stood—where the light came from?"

"As far as I can remember it stood about here. Wait a moment, I'll show you." Carefully Winchester picked his way through the feathery ash in the doorway, bent down and retrieved something. These are the hinges of the folding camp table on which it must have been standing."

"You remember the place where Culver lay? . . . Good! And you noticed Bennerton pick up the remains of an oil table-lamp from just beside the body? That was when we'd finally put the fire out."

"Yes. It looked to me as if Culver had dropped the lamp and so set fire to the hut, which would explain everything, and certainly dispense with any need to hold an Inquest." With an impatient jerk he ground out his cheroot on the wall.

"Yet it's difficult to accept your hypothesis." Balance spoke quietly, soothingly. "Difficult to believe that at one

moment Culver was capable of carrying the lamp from the table to the doorway, but at the next was so drunk as to be incapable of crawling a few yards to safety."

"Why not? After all, natives are sometimes burned to death in similar huts. There's no motive for suicide or murder, surely?"

"Can't say." There was no trace of answering aggression in Balance's voice or manner. "Culver was your accountant wasn't he? Which makes money a possible motive. He must handle a good deal of cash in a Mine of this size. How about attempted robbery with violence, accidentally ending in murder? The thief in search of keys or cash upsets the lamp over his victim and burns down the hut to cover his crime. How about embezzlement, then suicide on realising that he would be discovered through having unexpectedly to hand over his accounts to another man during his absence? Just before you came to his drink party last night he remarked how annoying it was that he had to hand over the complete accounts. Said he had hoped you would let him leave just a working balance in the small safe until his return."

Balance, dreamy-eyed, seemed to have forgotten the Manager, might even have been musing aloud. Anxiety grew on Winchester's broad, red face.

"Does anyone know whether this fiancée of Culver's really exists? From what I heard last night I gather his intention to marry came as a surprise to most people." Winchester was about to reply, but the D.O. continued, "If the girl's a myth, or an accomplice, the pretext of a wedding at Lagos would be an ideal opportunity to get clear of this country with embezzled funds. Simply walk on board any boat in port and be out of jurisdiction at least a couple

of weeks before you got suspicious. He'd be in England or have doubled on his tracks at the Islands by then. Of course, he'd have sense enough to book his passage in advance under an assumed name."

"But good God, man!" Huskily the Manager found his voice. "Surely you don't mean . . . you can't suspect that"

"I don't suspect anything. But you said there were no motives for suicide or murder, so I gave you the two least probable causes of murder and suicide that I thought of. And you see how sufficient the motives sound. There are usually more motives for a crime than one knows what to do with." The District Officer's dreamy voice became more practical. "It's a good deal more probable that you or I killed Culver of course."

A grin which said, "Now you're being funny," said it almost with relief, spread across Winchester's broad face.

"I've finished here now." Balance marked down on his plan the position of a charred shoe-sole which one of his policemen raked out of the last pile of ashes and held up for recognition. He closed the notebook for the last time and slipped it into his pocket, one of the two large sack-like pockets in the front of his "bush blouse."

"If you like I'll come to your office and help you check Culver's accounts and cash."

"Damned grateful if you will, Balance. You've rather put the wind up me with this theory of yours. There might be something in it."

They kicked the ashes from their shoes, and started away from the now empty ruins. Half way across to the office Winchester stopped.

"Keys!" he slapped the pockets of his white linen suit.

"I've got one key of the big safe, but Culver had the other two, also the key of the small safe where we keep the petty cash."

"They're here." Balance drew from his pocket a jangling bunch, blued and discoloured by heat. "I found them last night stuck to a piece of burnt leather which had been his belt. You remember he hadn't changed into evening kit. Thought they would be better in my keeping than lying out all night."

Winchester murmured his thanks as he took them.

"One's a Milner safe key, and there are two, numbered 1 and 3 which belong to a big safe or a strong-room door. So they seem to be complete. The other keys belong to his boxes," Balance explained. "Provisionally, we can take it that the presence of the keys refutes the robbery-with-violence hypothesis."

"Mind your head!"

Balance took the friendly warning, and ducked to avoid the low thatch of the verandah. The roof itself he noted, was 'pan'—corrugated iron—and the building of the usual sun-dried mud. So the thatched verandah on its supports of forked poles must have been a more recent addition. He looked at his wrist watch. After seven. So the office staff should be there, and the office itself working. Good.

Coming from the morning glare outside, Balance was in the middle of the room before he could make out any details. It was Winchester's own office they appeared to be in. Simply enough furnished: a large locally made table spread with correspondence trays, and a chair polished with use, without cushions or padding. On the walls graphs in many colours showed the monthly output in tin-concentrate for the main and outlying camps of the Company. Some

gave comparative curves for several years. More newly opened camps ran to fewer curves and less colour—but Winchester was speaking.

" . . . go over ledgers and things later. Here's the cash-book." A down-country clerk, a denationalised native of the coastal belt in mail-order lounge suit, said good-morning with an ingratiating smile and laid the heavy volume open on the table.

The D.O. looked on whilst Winchester ran a pencil rapidly down the last days' entries and checked the balance. The entries were in a different hand to the flourishing signature opposite the total cash on hand. H. A. Culver it looked like.

"You enter up the book, don't you, Mr. Comlavi, and Mr. Culver issues you a small working balance each day?" Winchester's tone was brusque, accusatory almost.

"Yes, sah. Oh yes, sah. That is so, sah. And Mr. Culver, sah, at the end of the day he checks my balance and lock the money up again." Nervously Comlavi threaded a pen through his crinkly hair parallel to the shaved parting.

"In spite of my orders that the Accountant will keep both cash and cash book, eh?"

The clerk squirmed apologetically.

Winchester turned to Balance and pointed with his pencil. "These receipt entries of lump sums will be withdrawals from the big safe which we treat as a strong-room. They should tally with payments from the strong-room book. Where's the strong-room book?" He turned to the shrinking Mr. Comlavi.

"I do not know, sah. I think Mr. Culver leaves it in the safe."

"You don't seem to know anything, Mr. Comlavi; you may go."

"Thank you, sah." With obvious relief the clerk disappeared behind a matting screen. Balance also felt relieved. A very general but dashed unpleasant habit this of bullying your native subordinates when the tropics jangled your nerves.

The three keys worked effectually, in spite of the fiery ordeal they had undergone. The cash in the small safe agreed to within a penny or two with the balance shown in the cash-book. Payment entries in the strong-room register agreed with the lump sum receipts in the cash-book.

To ease the Manager's mind the big safe was opened and checked with the strong-room register. Remittance entries to that checked with the Manager's own cheque counter-foils. Since the big safe could not be opened without the Manager's key in addition to the two held by Culver, it was difficult to see how anything could have been taken. But Balance sympathised with Winchester's anxiety.

They signed the last book as correct and locked everything away. The totals of out-station pay sheets had been checked with corresponding book entries. Subject to a check extending further back in time than they had opportunity for at the moment, the result was a complete vindication of the Accountant. A few personal belongings such as a wrist watch with a broken face and two war medals, which Culver had obviously placed in the safe for custody, they slipped into a specie bag and carried away.

It was after nine o'clock. The District Officer accepted Winchester's invitation to a wash and some breakfast, with gratitude. It was already blazing hot in the open beyond the office.

CHAPTER V

AS they passed under the arching bougainvillea, and up the whitewashed steps, the verandah of the Manager's house seemed invitingly cool. The garden boys had been at work with buckets and watering cans, and the scent of flowers and of fresh, damp earth still hung in the air.

"Morning, Manager! Morning, Balance! 'By their boots my dear Watson, you will deduce that they've been diggin' in the ashes!'" Paige-Thomas slid his feet off the leg-rest and lifted himself out of a deck-chair.

"Lord, I'm sorry P.T. Completely forgot I'd asked you to breakfast. Hope you haven't been waiting long." Winchester was the genial host again, "My missus not up yet, I suppose? Last night rather upset her, and I expect we shall have to breakfast without her."

Glasses and bottles stood on a carved native stool on the verandah. Winchester made his way to them.

"What will you have, Balance? Hope you've helped yourself, P.T."

Paige-Thomas held up his half empty glass in reply. Both hands were bandaged, the result of lifting the burning lintel off Culver's terrier last night. Balance helped himself to a beer and sat down.

"Just time for a couple of drinks before the boys bring breakfast." The Manager poured himself a stiff gin and bitters in a long glass and filled up with soda. "Here's to us and our thirsts." He drank deeply. "I need something in the way of a pick-me-up after last night. Look here, what about taking our drinks indoors, where it's cooler?"

Winchester held the fly-screens back for his guests to enter and, glass in hand, they filed in. Despite open windows, stale cigar smoke from overnight still soured the air. The bar had been dismantled and the extra chairs removed, but Chinese lanterns and festoons of coloured paper still swung from the rafters. Somehow a paper cap had been caught up, and now swayed mockingly over the centre of the breakfast table. Balance looked at it, and then at the lined, weary faces of the other two men. The host was questioning Paige-Thomas about his recent prospecting. Balance's thoughts switched back to their last meal in this room.

"The White Man's Grave" is the well earned title of West Africa. Sudden deaths from illness, suicide, even accident and murder snatch away the man who was to have ridden over to spend the week-end with you, frustrate the ambitions of the newly arrived, cheat the man about to retire. The most perfect health is required of a candidate for either Government or private posts. He may not be under twenty-three or twenty-four years old when he joins. He is compulsorily retired at an age when professional and business men in other countries are still in their prime; and still the death rate is that of an early convict settlement, unequalled in this generation in any trade or occupation, except that of fighting troops on active service.

Death must not be allowed to shake the courage of the survivors. With Culver lying in the tin-store outside, the Christmas dinner had gone on.

Even Mrs. Winchester had faced the ordeal. Not in the black dress. That would have been too mournful. But in something colourful, a sun coloured tulle, as cheerful as the crackers and the decorations. In keeping with the smile

with which she disposed her guests and took her seat at the table. Balance had caught that smile once—then looked away. The stunned horror on her face, in those large, grey eyes, as the expression wavered and passed, was too awful a contrast.

It was after the fish had been served that her mouth had begun to quiver, and she had risen and turned towards the door. Come to think of it, the quivering of the tip of her nose had been the first sign of her breakdown. Funny that! Curious too, the way she had held on to the sauce-spoon and table-napkin as she left the table. Her going had eased the strain quite noticeably. The pink and youthful Benner-ton looked shaken and white, but the rest of them could obviously be depended upon to play their parts. Winchester got into his jovial stride, and Paige-Thomas concocted, on the spur of the moment, some impossible and wildly scandalous incidents which he claimed were extracts from the Manager's unwritten biography.

With Mrs. Winchester out of the way, smoke-room stories became possible. They took the place of reasonable conversation and aided the forced hilarity. Nobody seemed to eat much. But one wine and then another was served as the courses followed each other in formal order.

Nothing had been omitted. Not even the Christmas crackers that ornamented the table. When the port and the wonderful old liqueur brandy had gone round, Winchester had leant across to Balance with a paper cracker. It exploded cheerfully and set the example for more cracker pulling. The bigger part, including the motto had stayed in Winchester's large, red hand. But the paper cap and a jews-harp had fallen on Balance's side of the table. The cap had been a pirate's cocked hat with skull and cross-

bones. Playing the tiny instrument with the dramatic swayings of a grill-room orchestra violinist he raised wild applause.

What was it that the motto had said? Let's see:

“Something, something heart,
Something till we part.
Something from the grave
Love will ever save.”

But it hadn't saved Culver had it? Interesting the way the fat cooked out of a burned man. Come to think of it, he hadn't noticed before. For instance, when the wounded got caught in a scrub fire that the Turkish stick-grenades had started; about the last attack on the Palestine front that had been. Just before the Armistice.

After dinner—pipes and cigars. More whiskies and sodas. Must have been after two in the morning when Kartel began to attract attention. Long, lean, with long, swarthy face and straight, black hair, he turned out, surprisingly, to be Scotch, with the Scottish passion for religious argument. Had Marren, his audience, been more sober, Kartel would have sunk, little by little into sorrowful silence, and probably slept. But Marren, a little red-headed Irishman, floated also on a whiskey tide of eloquence. The point he wished to drive home, tapping Kartel's stiff shirt front with a gravy-soiled spoon, was that *all* famous generals were by birth Irishmen, a point that Kartel seemed to him to be evading.

Suddenly there was the thud of blows. As suddenly both were on the floor, and Kartel, now possessed of the spoon had it in Marren's mouth and was trying to force it down his throat. With wild yells of joy the rest of the party left their drinks and added themselves to the fight, sepa-

rated the brawlers and sat on them.

Bennerton, by happy instinct, started the gramophone. The heaps on the floor sorted themselves out, rose and danced. The incongruous dancing of men with men. Keeping up the pretence of Christmas hilarity by any means, normal or grotesque, that were available. More whiskey.

Then a nightcap. Still that smooth ten-year-old Scotch. Lovely stuff, and a shame to swill it in such quantities. But it had the advantage of leaving no headache in the morning.

Balance with a jerk, drew his mind back to the breakfast room.

P.T. had been giving the Manager a general account of his trip in search of new tin fields. Most of the really paying mining rights and leases held by the Company had been discovered by this man with the lazy blasé manner.

Paige-Thomas was saying something as he helped himself to more eggs and bacon. Winchester referred the question to Balance.

"What's really your idea in holding an inquest?"

"Have to hold one, by law, when death is by violence or from cause unknown. Sometimes it turns out to be just a formality—takes the place of a doctor's certificate of cause of death." Balance refused more bacon and eggs and stirred his coffee reflectively. "Sometimes it gives the police a point from which to start investigations. It's often useful in getting the witnesses' exact impressions and knowledge recorded before they begin to be blurred by time or coloured by reason and imagination. If you give a witness long enough to consider he'll usually tell you what he thinks he ought to have seen instead of what he really saw. I've seen statements that a car was driven so fast that it cornered on its two inside wheels, the outside ones being off the ground.

A conventional belief only a few years back, but impossible. In one case I tried, a witness, who was doing his best to tell the truth, insisted that he had seen a blow which was believed to have resulted indirectly in a man's death. Reference to the Inquest Proceedings which had been taken two months earlier and immediately after the death, showed that the first statement by the witness was that he had *heard* a blow struck. In other words he had heard a sound as of a blow. Though he had been in full view of the accused and the deceased he had not seen the blow or he would have said so then. But believing he had heard it, and knowing from his position he must have also seen it if it had occurred, he came to believe—quite honestly—that he had seen it.”

Marmalade, the unsweet Oxford kind. He helped himself to some and some more toast.

“In that instance the witness’ self-deceit was the best possible evidence for the defence, as the two statements, taken together, said in effect ‘I am utterly and completely satisfied that if the accused had struck the deceased I should have seen the blow. But I only heard the *sound* of a blow.’”

“The testimony which had nearly hanged a man saved him in face of very damning circumstantial evidence. He But I’m talking ‘shop.’” Balance broke off, with his rare smile. “Tell me lots about ‘overburden’ or something like that, and bore me in return.”

“That reminds me, P.T.,” Winchester followed the false trail. “Talking of overburden, that south paddock . . .”

“Awf’ly interestin’ Balance, but let’s get back to the ‘Crown’s Inquitch.’” Paige-Thomas was not to be diverted. “Any ideas rumblin’ through your mind? Looks a simple sort of accident unless you’ve spotted a joker somewhere.”

"The joker, as you call it, is that a man has apparently been burnt to death, and there is no reason why he should have been." Balance drew an ancient cherry-wood pipe from the depths of a haversac-like pocket, and with his left hand put it in a pocket of his jodhpurs. "Or in other words we have a body, and an obvious cause of death. The only weakness is that the obvious cause is almost the only completely impossible one that we can think of."

"You mean there was nothin' to stop his escapin' from the fire?"

Balance nodded. His left hand had filled his pipe with the tobacco which to the horror of his native washerman he carried loose in his trousers pocket. Breakfast was over. He produced the pipe filled from his pocket and lit it.

"Supposin' Culver was pretty well blotto?"

Paige-Thomas put forward the obvious suggestion. "He'd had about as many drinks as he could stand when we poled away. Must have been half an hour later when I spotted the blaze. He hadn't started to change as you can still see from his burnt clothes. Christmas night and his last bachelor party! He probably necked 'em good and proper in that half hour."

"You're wrong on one point, P.T. I don't know how much he'd taken before I came—I was the last to drop in to his drink party, you remember—but I'll swear to his being as sober as any of us when we left." Winchester was firmly emphatic. "Whew! What's that you're smoking, Balance? Native tobacco? Thought it might be fluff and things out of your pocket. Let's go out on the verandah for a moment. Then I must get back to the office. Cigarettes and cheroots beside you, P.T. I suppose you wouldn't like to try one would you, Balance?"

CHAPTER VI

THE head servant followed with their half-empty cups and poured out more coffee. A canary-like bird was seeking something among the magenta flowers of the bougainvillea. Flower beds stretched down in front of them, bordering the red laterite drive, and the well kept lawn of dhub-grass made one think of home, shady elms and bygone garden parties. A couple of garden boys under Mrs. Winchester's daily supervision had built up this small man-made oasis almost inch by inch in a barren land charred by the sun and seared by alluvial tin mining. Even the soil had had to be carried there by head-pan and dumped into laboriously carved trenches and rock-built terraces.

The three exiles relaxed as they slid into their long chairs and stirred the coffee. A peaceful gurgle, like a snore, rose from Balance's ever-foul pipe. But the heat, as the rays of the sun struck more directly on the earth, increased minute by minute. Soon would come the jangling nerves, the slight headache, the general feeling of discomfort and unfitness that afflicts the white man in the tropics from breakfast-time till sundown.

Unconsciously they suspended argument the better to enjoy the last few moments of peace. The small, yellow bird called up two small, yellow friends. Together they went through elaborate gymnastics on almost invisible twigs. Then, stationary awhile on their hair-like legs, they posed as though awaiting appreciation. Paige-Thomas clapped silent, bandaged hands, winced, and turned gravely

to Balance, "I think they might have bowed, acknowledged' the applause."

Winchester's chair creaked under his heavy frame as he put his cup down. "As I said, Culver was sober when we left him. What's more he's been drinking very little lately. Getting himself in trim for this marriage palaver of his, I expect. Poor devil! Now how many drinks did each of us average after we left him? Over ten, fifteen might be nearer the mark. Yet when you left here last night—this morning, rather—none of you would have been unable to crawl five yards to safety out of a burning hut. Got my drift? He couldn't have swallowed more than ten drinks in the half hour we were away from him. Try to do it yourself and see. We spread our drinks over a longer time, which would give them less effect, but this would be counter-balanced by the way we mixed beers, cocktails, wines, liqueurs, whiskies and again beers."

"We can go further," this from the District Officer. "In all probability Culver can't have taken more than two or three drinks after we left. He opened a new bottle when we arrived. He thanked Kartel for it, so probably borrowed or bought it from him for the occasion."

"Agrees with what I said about his drinking very little lately," Winchester interrupted. "He's had no whiskey in his house for several months so as to avoid temptation."

"Agrees too with what I was sayin'. He was moppin' it up like a kipper-taster when I left here at the end of September. There wasn't any word of his gettin' married then. What usually happens when a heavy drinker goes dry for some months and then decides to have 'just one or two'? The human eye can't follow the movements of his drinkin' arm!"

"Culver might possibly, probably even, have got completely shot away if he had lived till later in the evening." Balance carried on his explanation. "But only this one bottle was found in or around his house. I've had the whole place searched, including the bushes nearby. The ashes have all been put through graduated sieves. Which sieves, by the bye, I borrowed from your mine." He turned to the Manager, "I hope it's all right? They'll be none the worse."

"Now out of that one bottle we each had one drink. Ourselves and Culver . . . four." Balance ticked them off on his fingers. "Marren, Sayles, and Kartel . . . total seven. Any others? Oh yes, Bennerton . . . that makes eight. There wasn't much time, so only one or two people had second drinks. Say eleven drinks accounted for . . ."

"Stop addin' drinks. You're makin' me thirsty!"

"Almost over now! Eleven drinks from the bottle accounted for? Correct? Good! Now Naraguta Club used to average up to sixteen drinks a bottle when the club waiter poured, and up to twelve when members helped themselves. They wished the secretaryship on to me my first tour before I knew any better, so I remember. Last night my drink was on the weak side. The kind of opening drink of the evening you used to wash the dust away. How were yours?"

"Weak. But suited the thirst I got out shooting."

"And yours?"

"Middlin' to weak. You've been talkin' of drinks for nearly . . ."

"Last 'lap'—no jest intended. Eleven drinks accounted for out of say sixteen in the bottle. And one if not two drinks of the size that Culver was pouring were still in the

bottle after he died."

"Please teacher! I know the answer!" Paige-Thomas lifted a hand and snapped his bandaged fingers to attract attention. "Thirteen from sixteen leaves three. And even a three months' old teetotaler couldn't get much of a hoist out of three drinks. Leavin' murder as the last and wildest guess, how about suicide?"

"No motive, P.T.," Winchester cut in. "Balance and I have been over his accounts, and they're all straight. He's saved quite a bit of his salary this last year, I happen to know. He's not crossed in love. This last month since he knew definitely that his marriage was due to come off, he's been going round with a dazed sort of smile, reading letters and looking at photos instead of playing tennis or going shooting. Lord preserve us from another lovesick accountant."

Paige-Thomas put a finger to the old scar on his forehead, and rubbed it gently as if to stimulate thought. Then nodded.

Winchester rose, and a waiting servant handed him his sun-helmet. "Don't get up, you two, yell for anything you want. I must get across to the office. Let's see. Inquest—you've fixed that haven't you, Balance? Telegram to the fiancée to stop her at Lagos. Funeral—coffin's nearly finished by now, grave will take another three hours at least; the ground is hard as a rock. I'll warn people for funeral at five o'clock. Notice of death—that went in to the Resident a few minutes after we sat down to breakfast. I heard the lorry start down the road. The wire to the girl went at the same time. That all?"

"All except settling Culver's estate." The D.O. produced his note-book and checked through a similar list. "And

that will take a couple of months at the least. Have to write to Lagos about the formalities, and there'll be an auction of Culver's effects to be held, and so on. Thanks for sending my note off to the Resident. Your lorry will be much faster than my village-to-village runners."

"If it doesn't break down! See you in the office after the inquest, P.T. I want your advance report on the prospecting you've done; the detailed report can come later." Winchester fixed the chin-strap over the peak of his helmet and strode down the steps. His white suit and hat gleamed dazzlingly in the sunlight, then were lost to view behind the fence with its load of passion-flower.

Paige-Thomas with half-closed eyes seemed relaxed, about to fall asleep. A cigarette newly lighted slipped from his fingers to the ground. But something inconsistent in his attitude caught the D.O.'s attention. More accustomed to natives than white men he could not quite place it, found himself puzzled. With seeming carelessness he examined him.

Six-foot-one to one-and-a-half, Balance judged his height. Tall even for this country where tall men seem to congregate. Well built in frame, but thin, almost angular, probably he'd been heavier in his youth, but had been thinned out by the Tropics that make thin men thinner and fat men ever bulkier. His long jaw, looking longer for lack of a moustache, marked the athlete. He would have fitted the centre court at Wimbledon, for instance; but his line might be anything from polo to pelota.

Strange to say that impression of tenseness persisted when eyes, body, even his fingers were relaxed. In court a native will sit smilingly at ease on the ground, his feet disposed sideways beneath him, and only his hand, pinching and

kneading his bare foot, will show his perturbation; or perhaps his toes will clench and unclench while even his hands repose passively on his lap.

Aha! Balance's eyes rested on Paige-Thomas' grey suede shoes, on bulging uppers out of keeping with their trim smartness. With ordinary leather shoes the sign would have been hidden. But there before him was the inconsistent item. Toes curled up, tense, like a cat's, bulging upward the soft leather. Poor devil, so he was taking Culver's death pretty hard. His pose of casualness had been lost for a moment when he risked his life for the terrier last night. Nothing cynical and aloof about that! And here again was a crack in his mask.

"Look here, Balance, what d'you make of all this?" Paige-Thomas stretched ostentatiously and came to life. "Take away the presumptions of accidental death and suicide an' it leaves murder."

"Not necessarily murder, but homicide, which is a more general term. Only felonious homicide is murder. Might be a case of accidental killing."

"Bit puzzlin' to me. How come?"

"I might have been showing Culver my revolver—and by the way we found a revolver among the ashes—and shot him accidentally while he was holding the lamp for us to see by. Scared stiff at realising what I'd done, I wouldn't notice the flames lick up from the spilt lamp at first. I'd know Culver was done for, then realise in a flash that the fire would hide what I'd done. I might even have started the fire myself and planted the lamp in a natural position."

"Psychology of your idea is right, up to a point," Paige-Thomas cut in with a show of interest. "You remember in the war how you hated a man you'd killed so as not to

feel pity for him. Chances are that anyone killin' Culver accidentally would have no compunction over the fire—especially if it was an accidental one—burning the body.”

Balance's expression was troubled. “There's a weakness, though, in the hypothesis, which, to my mind, rules it out. I never have finger-print experts, home office analysts to help me in my thief-taking, collaring murderers and so on. So I have to work on motives and characters of possible suspects.

Natives' motives, natives' characters, though, and I don't know much about white men's. So I may be wrong about white men; and I'd like your opinion and help. If the killing was accidental, it would have been a surprise, a shock to the killer; so great a shock that almost nobody would be able to wipe away all traces of guilty conscience. In fact I'd say that of the possible killers only you and I and Winchester would have been able to act an innocent part successfully.

“Clever man! So you've got the field cut down to three possible runners already!”

“No. Only we three *could* have played the innocent successfully if we had accidentally killed Culver. But none of us *would* have played the innocent.”

“Because”

“Because, Paige-Thomas, none of us would get so panicky as to forget that the risk of punishment for accidental homicide—manslaughter—is small, and that attempted concealment would make the act of killing seem intentional. And the punishment for intentional killing is usually death.”

Paige-Thomas chuckled. “So what it really comes to, Balance, is this. That if Culver is dead he must have died

of accident, suicide, manslaughter, or murder. None of these seems probable. Therefore, what is the answer? That Culver probably is not dead!"

"I know. But Culver's body has been properly identified and we are going to bury it this afternoon." The D.O. grinned cheerfully, "Bit of a problem, isn't it?"

Paige-Thomas rose and called for his hat. "Count me out of this damn silly detecting game, Balance. You're layin' axe to a *gogua*, a dust devil, mistakin' it for a tree. By the bye, was that revolver you found loaded?"

"Loaded and discharged in all six chambers."

"Thought so, from your sayin' he might have been accidentally shot with it." Paige-Thomas was visibly elated. "I take back what I said just now about silly detectin', and I'll put you on a hot clue. It may have been Culver's revolver you found. He had an old Webley four-fifty. But it can't have been his ammunition in it. For the most obvious reason"

"Time for the inquest." Balance reached for his topee and put it on his head. "You can tell me there."

PART II

This book is a very good
and useful book to be
read by every one who
is interested in the
subject of the material

Thank you for the
information which
you have given me
regarding the material
which you have
sent me.

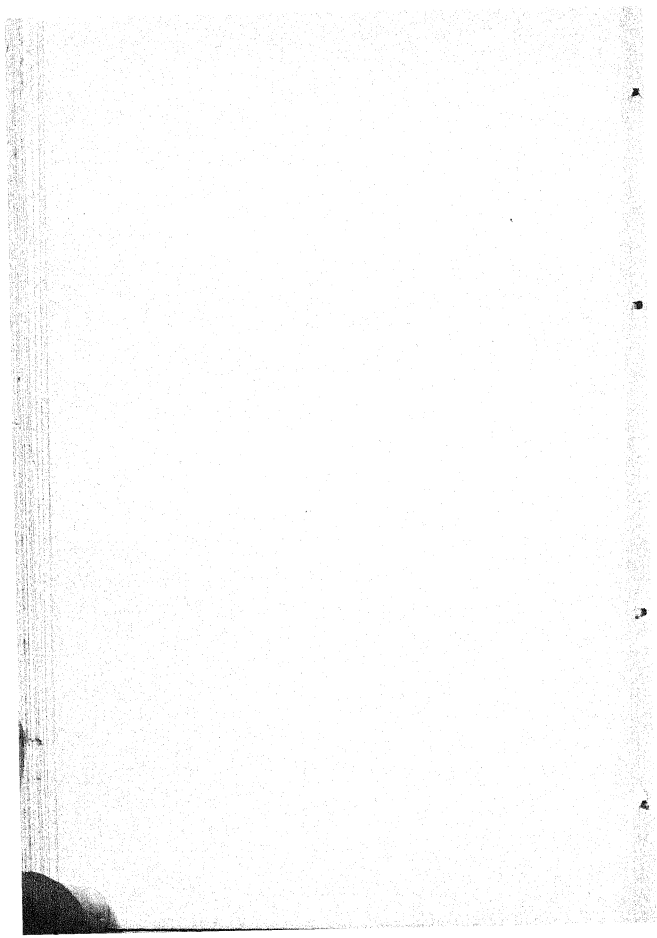
Yours
H. C. C.

The book is a very good
and useful book to be
read by every one who
is interested in the
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CHAPTER VII

IN the Courts of the Northern Provinces neither wigs nor gowns can be found. One case in a hundred, perhaps, is tried in the English language. The other ninety-nine concern only natives, and charge, evidence and judgment are given in one or other of the vernaculars. Sometimes in a mud-walled rest house, sometimes beneath a shady tree near the village market-place, the judge sits on a camp chair behind a camp table and listens to the statements, formulates the charge, or clarifies the point at issue.

Laboriously translating into unaccustomed legal English the young magistrate would write the cases in the leather-bound Minute Book before him. One eye must be kept on the Legal Adviser, skilled in law but ignorant of the people, who would recommend that the judgment be approved or quashed. Native religion, village customs, witchcraft, moral ideas which differ from the white man's, all such matters must be eliminated from the Minutes, or carefully explained by notes and supported by testimony, lest they be misconstrued at distant headquarters. The constant problem of how best to temper the application of laws, made by Englishmen for Englishmen, to a people of different race, different religion, different ethics, different morals, different language, different economic situation, has to be met and solved afresh each time.

Balance was accustomed to these difficulties. As he entered the tin shed—now transformed by a few chairs and a table into a Coroner's Court—he would have preferred

the most tangled case of native land-holding to the simple inquest before him. The red-robed *dogari* with his trim, grey beard and row of medals, proudly showed the papers and pens he had borrowed from the mine office and arranged on the table. These, with the Bible brought by Balance, completed the furniture and appurtenances of the court. In front of the table was a ring of wooden chairs also, obviously borrowed from Winchester's office. Behind these a rough native matting screened the Court from Culver's effects, from Culver, from the flies which buzzed and droned in the silence.

Winchester and the other white men had been smoking a final cigarette outside. As Balance gave some instructions to his *dogari* and arranged his papers they entered. Within the shade of the shed each removed his helmet, decided at a glance that the pan roof was not sun-proof and replaced it on his head. Feet scraped, chairs rasped on the concrete floor. From the direction of Winchester's office an iron bar clanged out the hour upon a suspended railway tie. As the chimes died away the District Officer opened the proceedings.

"In the Provincial Court of the Hill Province Nigeria at Mafun, this 26th day of December before me, John Balance, District Officer, Coroner.

"*Inquisition*, quaint old word that, redolent of religious persecution, *upon the body of . . .*"

Balance dipped his pen in the ink and looked at the Manager of the Mafun Mines, "Can you give me the Christian names of the deceased?"

"James, Clarence."

"Thank you. *Upon the body of James Clarence Culver, then and there lying dead, having to enquire how the same*

came to his death"

At a sign from the District Officer the Manager came forward and took the Bible in his right hand. Self-consciously he repeated the oath. Clearing his throat, he replaced the Bible on the table, and waited.

"Name and occupation first, please. Then how you came to know deceased."

"My name is Ethelred George Winchester, and I am General Manager of the Mafun Tin Mines and its four associated companies. I first came into touch with the deceased about five years—almost exactly five years—ago, when he was appointed accountant to one of our subsidiary mines. Two years ago, on his return from leave, he was transferred to this headquarter camp at Mafun."

"As accountant? . . ."

"As accountant."

"Thank you." Balance wrote awhile. Then, "Do you identify the body behind the screen as that of James Clarence Culver, your accountant?"

"One moment!" Winchester turned and walked round the edge of the screen.

Balance rose. "I think we might all view the body at the same time. As the identification may be difficult I may have to ask you all to help."

Together, Coroner and witnesses followed Winchester.

Two *dogaris* hidden in the hot darkness swung open the wide doors at the further end of the shed to let in light. In orderly rows along each side were the fire-rusted remains of tin uniform cases and metal articles. A sour vinegar smell hung in the stuffy air.

In the middle of the shed a worn, black tarpaulin covered something lying on a group of native mats. Winchester

stooped forward as the *dogaris* lifted off the stiff tarpaulin and turned back a grey blanket. Hastily he straightened up and stepped back. One by one the other men followed him, perspiration dripping from under their helmets on to the concrete floor as they bent forward. The blanket and tarpaulin were replaced. A louder buzz rose from the disappointed flies.

"I can only identify the body indirectly."

Balance poised the pen and waited.

"The body I have seen is the body which was," Winchester was obviously weighing his words, "burnt in the fire last night. When we first reached the fire I recognised that body as that of my Accountant. But it is no longer recognisable directly as that of the Accountant, only through that intermediate step."

"Thank you," John Balance as he wrote murmured his appreciation of the careful distinction. "Will you now give me, in brief, your experiences of last night insofar as they relate to the deceased."

"Yesterday being the twenty-fifth of December and Christmas day, was a holiday. I took my gun in the evening, and went for a walk past the South Paddock as far as Goshin Dutsi. On my return I heard voices at Culver's hut and guessed that a drink party was being held. I turned off the drive, and Culver invited me to take a drink with him."

"Give the time, if you can, and the names of those who were there."

"The time was probably just before 7.30. I saw or heard yourself, Paige-Thomas, and the deceased. I knew there were other people there, but did not see them or hear them speak, so am not sure who they were."

The Manager paused for John Balance to record the statement.

"What can you tell the court as to the state of the deceased at the time? Was he sad or cheerful, drunk or sober, disturbed or placid?"

"He appeared to me to be sober, cheerful, and, I think one might say, placid. He may have been a little excited at going down to meet his future wife, but he was not disturbed or anxious. The conversation was about nothing in particular, and I cannot now recall it. After a short time I realised it was getting late and looked at my watch. To the best of my recollection the time was then a minute or two after a quarter to eight. Dinner at my house was to be at a quarter past eight, so I had to hurry off to change."

"Did the other guests leave at the same time as yourself?"

"It was dark when I came, and dark when I went and the oil lamp was inside the hut. I thought we all went off together, except, of course, Culver, but I cannot swear to that. It is only an impression."

"Here is a sheet of paper with a circle on it representing the hut in which deceased was living." John Balance placed it before the Manager and offered his pen. "The circle is broken at one place to represent the door. Will you mark down where, inside the circle, the lamp stood?"

Except for an occasional movement due to the hardness of the wooden-seated office chairs, the other white men in court had sat motionless, and apparently uninterested. Now they came hopefully to life. The lamp might mean something interesting.

"At about five minutes past eight my guests began to arrive. At about eight-ten, or it may have been later, the

last one, yourself, rode up from your rest-house. We were still waiting for Culver—probably at about a quarter past eight or a little after—when Paige-Thomas shouted that he saw a fire. We hurried out, meeting my wife on the way, but were too late to save either Culver or his belongings.”

“The fire was how many yards from your house? What was burning?”

Winchester looked surprised at Balance’s question.

Balance explained.

“These notes of evidence will have to explain the cause of death as far as it is known—will have to explain, not to me, but to the Resident, the Legal Adviser and so on. To people who have never been here, and know nothing about what happened. Forget that I know anything about what happened. Forget that I know anything about the matter, and explain as if to a total stranger.”

“I see. The fire was Culver’s hut, which lay about one hundred and fifty yards from my own. It was well alight when we arrived, and, though we saw Culver already dead, apparently, in the door of the hut, the heat drove us back and we had to leave him.”

Slowly the evidence was recorded. The heat from the iron roof overhead grew ever more intolerable. The court, magistrate and witnesses alike, hung their coats over the chair backs, or dropped them on the floor.

Witness succeeded witness, adding nothing but corroboration. Sweat-damped hands left marks upon the binding of the Bible. With occasional mopping of faces on handkerchiefs and shirt sleeves, the white men gave their statements, listened carefully as John Balance read over his minutes of their evidence, agreed to them, or asked for some minor correction. Damply they attached their signatures,

damply the District Officer subscribed his attestation.

Direct questions elicited no motive for suicide, no cause to suspect anyone of violently causing the death.

Winchester marked on the diagram of the hut the place where the lamp had been found in the morning, and also the spot where Culver had been found lying in the fire. All the witnesses agreed as to the position of the body.

Why had Culver not escaped from the flames?

Marren it was who *suggested* heart failure at the shock of dropping the lamp and seeing the house catch fire, or, he added, as an afterthought, it might have been sudden heart failure which caused him both to die and to drop the lamp.

The Manager, recalled at his own prompting, refuted the theory. Culver, in view of his forthcoming marriage had decided to increase his insurance. The insurance company had insisted on a fresh examination. For this reason the Accountant had asked leave to travel into Railhead by lorry to see the doctor retained by the Mafun Tin Mines. On his return, he had handed the insurance form to Winchester asking the Manager to witness his signature. From the doctor's certificate that he had then seen, as well as from the remarks of the dead man, Winchester was certain that Culver had been given a clean bill, not only as to heart but as to general health.

CHAPTER VIII

THE faint trickle of breeze, that had stirred the dust outside, died away. No air moved in the sun-stroked oven where the court sat. No further evidence bore on the suggestion of heart failure. No alternative cause of death was suggested.

The last witness signed his statement and walked back to his chair.

"Has anyone any further statement to make?" Balance looked from face to face. Negatives and head-shakes answered his enquiry.

"Apart from evidence, has anyone any suggestion to offer as to the cause of death? Probably most of us have had experience of a grass-roofed hut catching fire. As a matter of personal experience, I have been woken by the sound of the fire, and have not only escaped but have been able to save nearly everything that was in the hut. What stopped Culver walking or crawling five yards, or even less, to safety?"

But again the D.O.'s question was without result.

"Mrs. Winchester is ready to give her statement?" Balance turned to the Manager.

Winchester went to the entrance, gave some instructions to a messenger and returned.

"In the meantime there are some articles found outside Culver's hut which I will ask you all to identify if you can." The D.O. said something in the vernacular, and from

behind the screen the two turbaned red-robed *dogaris* appeared with trays of miscellaneous articles.

One tray held an almost empty whiskey bottle, and a number of glasses, two of them marked with adhesive tape. Kartel identified the bottle as of the same brand as the one he had lent Culver. Could not say definitely that it was the identical bottle, as it had no special mark, and the brand could be bought, under the usual permit, from the canteens at Railhead. Winchester deposed that all applications by employees of the Mine for permits passed through his office, and he had forwarded no application to the Station Magistrate at Railhead on behalf of Culver for a number of months—he thought four months.

Three of the glasses were recognised by their pattern as Culver's own. The other glasses had been lent, and were identified with varying degrees of certainty by the owners.

The tray was returned, with its contents, by the *dogari*, and Balance recorded the statements and obtained the usual signatures.

The second tray held cigarette ends, arranged in groups according to probable brand, a cork, probably from the whiskey bottle which was found corkless, an empty cardboard folder bearing the name of a firm of photographers, a small native snuff-gourd, a broken shoe- or boot-lace, two rounds of 12-bore ammunition, a tin ash-tray such as is included in tins of a certain brand of cigarette, and a pipe. Four match boxes of different kinds contained ends of burnt matches.

"These might almost be said to be the sweepings from round Culver's hut, except the photo-folder which was picked up beyond the henna hedge," John Balance smiled as he explained. "But actually they are a collection of all

alien matter that had not apparently lain out for more than a day or so. Shamaki, the smaller *dogari* here, is responsible for the selection. He is an able tracker and hunter, and the fact that the burning roof fell inwards left the ground fairly clear for him."

For the first time in the Inquest, Paige-Thomas put aside his boredom. The other Europeans clustered round, consulted with each other, debated, peered at the exhibits. At a word from John Balance the *dogari* put the tray on the table and stood back to allow more room. No one touched the articles; possibly with an idea of not destroying finger prints. The District Officer smiled to himself at their caution. No finger-print expert, no Home Office analyst would help in the solution of this mystery. In this country, whether in police work, or road-making or house-building one had to use the primitive means at hand.

It was like a parlour game. The look of smiling interest seemed strange on faces marred by ill-health and bitter determination. Winchester was the first to score.

"Can I pick up these cartridges to look at them?" he asked the Coroner. "I think I recognise them."

He lifted them by the brass caps, and turned the other ends up to the light. Instead of the usual disc of cardboard that retained the shot, and on which the size of the shot is stamped there was another arrangement. The outer ring of the disc was there, but the centre part where the size of shot is usually shown had been punched out, leaving a circular hole. Through this circular hole could be seen a cylindrical lead ball.

"Paradox ball cartridges," Winchester explained. "I don't expect anyone else has them, they're not very usual, so they're probably mine; I had some out with me yester-

day. I must have unloaded just before I got to Culver's and put them beside me when I sat down. Can't think why I didn't put them in my pocket in the usual way. My left barrel's very slight choke explains why I can put two of them in my gun, and hence why I seem to have left two, and not just one paradox and one ordinary short cartridge." He looked the two cartridges over again carefully before replacing them. "Almost certain to be mine. The name of the maker is right too. He's a local man near my home, and not one of the big firms like Eley, Kynoch, U.M.C. and so on. I'd naturally put them in my gun about dusk coming back from Goshin Dutsi. It's open grassland and there are usually a few *duiker* to be seen just about dusk when they start to graze."

"Don't think we need make any record." Balance's pen had been hovering over a sheet of paper. He now put it down. "The pipe is mine. No one else smokes a cherry-wood. Must have fallen out after the pocket of my dinner jacket was ripped when we were trying to get Culver out. The cork I think we may safely assume to be the one from the whiskey bottle."

Paige-Thomas looked up from his examination of the oddments. "This is a native snuff box. These three cigarette ends are mine I think. I remember smoking three last night, and their oval shape, as Shamaki has noticed, marks them off from the Virginian ones. The fat round one is like those the Manager smokes as alternative to cheroots. That oval-shaped end that looks like one of mine but thinner is probably a Gold Flake that's been trodden on. The other large group would need a magnifying glass to separate them. The snuff box must have been dropped by one of the labourers who came up to put the fire out. Nine

out of ten of them carry them as well as imported cigarettes.

Kartel recognised the tin ash-tray. Culver's servant had packed all his cigarettes. This he had opened at the drink party and had passed round, throwing the miniature ash-tray that it contained on the ground.

"We can't identify all these burnt matches and the remaining cigarette ends for the present. I ought, I believe, to hold a Preliminary Inquiry first, to get such details cleared up, and then proceed to the Inquest. But I am informally combining the two." As he spoke the District Officer looked round to see if any one appeared to object. "Partly because of the obvious need to give the order for burial as soon as possible. Partly to save the Mafun Mine the loss of time that would be caused if you had to attend the court on two separate occasions."

"Very grateful, I'm sure!" Winchester voiced what was obviously the general opinion, and wiped some perspiration off his chin. "Speaking for myself, personally, I'd like to get the matter finished as soon as possible. As Manager of the Mine, I'd like to thank you for taking the needs of our staff into consideration in this way."

John Balance scratched the neatly fitting knee of his jodhpur and looked awkwardly at the speaker. Clearly he had not intended to elicit this vote of thanks.

"Any identification of the shoe or boot-lace? Black, flat, cotton, with the usual kind of tag," he picked it up from the tray and held it out for inspection. "I see Mrs. Winchester crossing the square, and as soon as the shoe-lace is disposed of the Court can take her statement. No ideas? Shamaki is uncertain how long it has lain out, so it may quite possibly—probably even have no connection with the enquiry."

THE MYSTERY OF THE FLAMING HUT

He replaced the lace and at a sign Shamaki removed the tray and carried it back behind the partition. Then all heads turned to the door.

CHAPTER IX

THE blaze of sunlight through the open doorway lessened as a short, slight woman paused on the threshold and lowered her red-lined sunshade. Winchester went towards her and Balance rose from his chair and lifted his sun-helmet.

"Good-morning! May I come in?" the voice was quiet and cultivated. She stood, folding the sunshade and glancing round the extemporised court. With a wide, white sun-helmet on her head, wearing a brown, sleeveless, cotton frock, short in the skirt and of apparent simplicity, she still had an air of grace, almost of elegance. Without further directions she walked confidently to the table and fingered the Bible. How different from her wild, inexplicable gestures of last night; her frantic urging on of the would-be rescuers, her desperate efforts to reach the smouldering body.

"I expect you want me to tell you what I can about last night?" As she raised her eyes enquiringly to the Coroner she showed a face worn and tired. Her grey eyes set in rings of weariness had still the solemn, observing gaze of a child. "Where shall I begin?"

John Balance administered the oath. The other white men moved back to their chairs and sat down.

"You met us as we ran down the drive. Give me your names in full, and then start with what led up to your discovery of the fire and made you decide to go for help."

"Mary Lois Winchester," slowly and distinctly she gave her names, then watched the pen. Balance noted this with

approval. As his pen paused she continued.

"I had dressed early last night in order to see that Garuba the steward boy had made no mistake in laying the table. The table and decorations seemed as I wanted them. A little after eight o'clock I saw the lights carried by the first guests coming up the drive," Mrs. Winchester paused to let the District Officer's racing pen catch up.

"I went to the back verandah to speak to the cook and make sure that dinner would be ready in time, and that the usual last minute calamity had not occurred." She smiled, and even in the green light reflected by the lining of her sun-helmet her expression had a slight sad charm. "The steward boy had refused to allow the cook any brandy for the Christmas pudding without direct orders from me or from my husband. In desperation the cook was about to use the remains of a bottle of cooking sherry that he had been given for trifles. So I was just in time to avert the calamity."

Balance was conscious of another smile in her voice. He could dimly see one hand playing with the leather tassel of the sunshade. The other, shapely and capable, lay on the Bible a foot or so in front of his left hand. The right hand, that was ringless, well manicured, smooth skinned. Would it be cool to the touch, or hot and clammy like his own and those of the other men? Cool, surely . . .

"It was stifling indoors. The house still held the heat of the day. I had a slight headache, and it would be cooler outside. I heard laughter from the dining-room, and knew that my husband was there to entertain you. I went down the back steps and round under the dining-room windows, hoping no one would hear the click of my heels on the concrete at the corner."

Simply and carefully she gave her statement, always watching the pen, keeping half a sentence or so ahead of it. None of the other witnesses had done that. They had needed a "One moment," and "Yes?" to stop and start them.

"Of course I ought to have been indoors to greet the guests as they came. But it was so cool and fresh and my head was getting better. Someone came up the drive on horseback, his boy carrying a lantern and what looked like the rider's hat. I dodged to one side, hid behind an oleander on the lawn and watched them pass. The lawn was smooth with rolling, and hard with the drought. It was easier to walk on in high heels than the laterite drive, and the dried dhub-grass crunched nicely under foot. I could feel it through the thin soles."

Balance stopped writing and looked up; he had wanted to look at her for a long time. He was accustomed to watching his witnesses as they spoke. Expressions, gestures, involuntary movements often illustrated the spoken word, and sometimes conveyed more than the witness intended. Not that there could be much reservation behind this simple account. John Balance realised with surprise that this witness had so far talked pleasantly, made him write down every word, and given him no time to watch her.

"Everything smelt nice too. Earthy and damp from the evening watering. I went down to the fence at the bottom of the garden to smell the roses there. Then I saw the fire from the direction of the hut where Mr. Culver was staying. First I thought it was the moon getting up—you know how red and bright it can look. But as I stood it got brighter and I knew it was the hut on fire. So I turned and ran up the drive to get help. That was where I met you all."

Balance could see the hand quivering on the Bible. Then it was withdrawn below the level of the table. Her breathing became nervous, breaking her sentences as if she were out of breath, though her voice remained low-toned and steady. Her face too would be controlled, expressionless or expressing only what it was intended to express. Women often had better control of their features than men had.

"And then?"

"After that you know what happened. We all went down together. But nothing could be done. I did not believe that you could not reach the body and drag it out of the fire. I tried myself, but couldn't. Oh! I had never seen a dead man before—not dead in that way. I think I must have lost my senses. Oh, it was terrible! Horrible! Terrible!"

Both hands now caught the edge of the table. She swayed. Winchester took a hasty step to her side and held her by the elbow. There was a stir in court; the shuffle and cough of awkward, embarrassed, male sympathy.

"That's all you need?" Winchester's question was half statement.

"Nearly all." Balance thought a moment, then turned up two statements of previous witnesses as though to confirm a recollection.

"You saw the fire from the bottom of the garden you say, and then ran straight up towards the house for help?"

"Yes, but I met you and the others on my way."

"Do you remember what you said when you met us?"

"Not exactly. I was excited. I think I said 'Help! help!'" Mrs. Winchester seemed to have recovered herself now. Her husband let go her arm.

"Two other witnesses remember that you said, 'Hurry!

Oh, hurry!' and 'Save him, oh please save him!' Is that right?"

"How can I be expected to remember?" She was angry now, it seemed. Women will hide fear, pain, sorrow, if need be, but only rarely do they succeed in masking anger. Men will hide fear and anger, but pain, and particularly sorrow less easily. Balance found himself looking fixedly at the witness.

"You can't remember?" The Coroner's voice was still quiet and soothing.

"No . . . No!"

Balance numbered the pages of this statement, blotted them, and slid them across the table.

"Will you read this over carefully, and, if you agree that it is a correct note of your statement, sign it here below." He indicated the place and held out the pen.

"I will sign that for her." Winchester would have taken the pen.

"I'm afraid that is not permissible."

"Sorry."

"Not at all."

John Balance felt ruffled. A court was a place for the weighing of facts, the application of law, not for social inanities.

Mrs. Winchester took the pen, leant over the table to write. Her hand touched Balance's hand on the table. Fretfully he thrust both his into his breeches pockets.

Natives he understood. White men weren't any trouble either. But white women in court seemed to upset things. With a feeling of relief he bowed as Mrs. Winchester spread her parasol and passed out into the blazing midday sun.

He felt for his pipe, then remembered where he was, and

put it back again. He looked across at the other white men. They were stretching their legs, mopping their necks, relaxing into more comfortable attitudes. So he was not the only "bushman" unused to white women. Not the only one who felt constrained and unwittingly posed before that rare animal the white woman. Thank Allah for that!

Paige-Thomas was taking his tunic off again. Everyone must have put his coat on because of Mrs. Winchester. He had done it himself! Ridiculous! He tore it off. This sort of thing would never do. He was all for informality in court up to a point. It stopped the witnesses getting stage fright. But to turn the thing into a . . . into a damned garden party . . . that's what it was—a damned garden party.

CHAPTER X

"THERE is one further item of evidence that the Court can consider before rising." A touch of formality would bring things back to normal. "With one exception, the contents of the boxes and the remains of other articles found inside the hut have not yet been examined." He gave a brisk order and the taller *dogari* hurried from behind the screen and laid the remains of a revolver on the table.

"The *dogari* here, Sulai Yola, will testify to finding the revolver, just as Shamaki has given evidence as to the finding of the other items. Normally a white police officer should then give expert evidence as to the state of the revolver, as the *dogaris* have no great experience with white men's weapons." John Balance looked from one face to another as though making a choice. "Paige-Thomas, I understand, has been through the Hythe musketry course and was an instructor on a revolver course for officers early in 1915. In view of his unusual experience, the Court now asks him to examine the weapon and give his testimony as an expert witness."

Paige-Thomas came to the table and picked up the revolver. He dusted it slightly with a handkerchief, turned it over, then looked at the Coroner to see if he was ready to take down the evidence.

"This pistol that I have been given is a short-barrelled Webley six-shot revolver of about .450 bore. It has the Government broad arrow and 'Mark V' stamped on it.

It is the type that was issued to certain non-commissioned officers during the war. Officers were expected to arm themselves with a longer-barrelled revolver." He turned to John Balance, "Am I givin' you the kind of information you want?"

"Exactly. Any further identification marks? Any signs of what has happened to the pistol in its recent past?"

"It is dated 1914. The revolving chambers are marked 139856, and underneath the barrel is the number—it's not very clear—yes, the same number, 139856."

"I have here a list of all firearm licences granted to Europeans in this Division." John Balance held up a sheet of typed foolscap. "I obtained it from the Commissioner of Police at Railhead. I always keep some such list so that, in the event of arms being stolen I can have a full description circulated at once. The owner seldom remembers the number and other details. I am not permitted to give evidence in my own court, but as a matter of interest I will read you the relevant extract. It runs, 'J. C. Culver, Mafun Mine, one .450 Webley revolver, Mk. V, No. 139856 on barrel.' There is no doubt therefore of the pistol's ownership."

"The revolver appears to have been in a hot fire," Paige-Thomas continued. "The side plates on the grip, usually of horn, if my memory serves me aright, have been destroyed, and only the holdin' bolt remains." Paige-Thomas picked it up from where he had laid it on the table. "I recognise the bolt which should be clamping these pieces of horn to the grip, though it was lyin' apart from the pistol. The heat has re-blued part of the steel, and turned some of it straw-colour. It also appears to have exploded the cartridges . . . May I 'break' the pistol?"

"If you can. It's jammed."

Pressing down the catch, Paige-Thomas strained at the weapon with his bandaged hands. Then tried to bend it open over the edge of the table. Still it resisted. Holding it by its stumpy little barrel he tapped the butt first on the heel of his neat, grey, suede shoes, then, more gently, on the hard concrete floor. Pressing back the catch he tried again. This time it opened, though not easily.

The delay in opening the revolver had aroused interest, curiosity. Men bent forward in their chairs as if to catch the first possible view of what might come. Almost as if they expected something to jump out.

"The cartridges are marked Kynoch '455. There are six, correspondin' in position to the hours, twelve, two, four, six, eight, ten on a clock face. Number six is the one that jammed the 'gun.' It was exploded by the heat, and the bullet had only about half an inch of travel in the chamber before it fetched up against the front frame of the pistol, jammin' the base of the cartridge hard against the frame at the back of the chamber, and bulgin' the chamber downwards against the bottom part of the frame. Numbers four and eight jammed their bullets to some extent, but not so completely as number six. So the pressure of the gases never rose as high as in number six chamber, and did not distort the chambers. But the bases of the cartridges are distorted. The pressure of the explodin' charges jammed only one side of each against the frame."

Paige-Thomas, engrossed in observation and deduction, obviously didn't care if anyone else was interested or not. John Balance was probably the only man who followed him closely.

"Chambers two and ten are undamaged. Nor are the

bases of the cartridges in those chambers injured. Nothin' in fact to be seen except the exploded cartridges, and . . . wait a minute . . . yes . . . silvery grazes left by the bullets on each side of the barrel. The marks of the bullets are dulled by the fire, but you can still just see them."

He held up the revolver for the Coroner to note the faint traces.

"That makes five cartridges described, those in positions correspondin' to the hours two o'clock, four o'clock, six, eight and ten o'clock. All of these cartridges were fired when in a position where the striker—the hammer—cannot have touched them off. Their appearance agrees with a supposition that the heat of the fire exploded them. There are altogether six cartridges, leaving one which I haven't yet described."

John Balance's racing pen was recording the observations and deductions verbatim. He had not examined the pistol. He considered himself biassed against the idea that murder could have been committed with it, and preferred that the observations and deductions should be made by an unprejudiced observer. So far his bias had been borne out by facts. The last cartridge, though, what about that?

"The last cartridge is in the position of twelve o'clock on a clock face. Bein' opposite to the barrel, it is in the position for firin', and could have been fired either by the falling hammer, if the trigger were pressed in the usual way, or later by the heat which set off the other cartridges. There is nothin' to show which actually occurred."

John Balance looked up sharply from his notes.

"There is nothing, in your opinion, to show that the pistol was not fired once by someone, and then tossed into the fire?" There was a note of deep concern in the District

Officer's voice.

"Nothin' I'm afraid."

"Let me see the pistol . . . thank you." John Balance glanced at it, perfunctorily, it seemed, and passed it back. Took up his pen and wrote what had been said.

(Question by court): There is nothing in your opinion to show that the pistol was not fired by someone and then tossed into the fire?

(Witness): Nothing, I am afraid.

(Note by court): Cartridge last referred to has in the approximate centre of the percussion cap a convex mark corresponding to hole through which striker projects when hammer falls.

"Is there anything more that you can tell the Court about this exhibit?"

"There is foul'n' in the barrel showin' that the bullet passed down it. But this does not show if the round was fired by heat or percussion. That is all."

Balance finished writing. "Would you read this, and if it is correct sign? Then pass the revolver round for the others to see. The Court thanks you for your expert assistance."

Paige-Thomas read carelessly through the deposition and added his signature. He put down the pen, and stood as if in thought, the pistol swinging by its trigger guard from one finger.

"There's one point that's puzzlin'." Paige-Thomas hesitated. It's not exactly on the subject you asked me to give evidence about, but you asked me to mention it at the inquest." He put the revolver down on the table again. "Where did the cartridges come from? Culver never had any. He preaches an amusin' doctrine—used to preach, that is—that an empty revolver may be useful for scarin'

away thieves, but a loaded one is an added danger. We've all heard his views, and laughed at 'em I'm afraid."

Winchester had jumped to his feet. Worry showed in his expression and in a finger that was enlarging a cigarette hole burnt in his white jacket.

"I gave Culver the cartridges not more than a week ago. I warned him that they might be too old to be reliable; but he laughed and said he didn't expect he would have to use them."

Balance drew a fresh sheet of paper towards him and wrote: *1st witness, E. G. Winchester, recalled, states, "I gave Culver . . . (Gosh there's tension in the air! Everybody's suddenly wondering if Winchester shot Culver, and half of them think he did.) . . . have to use them."*

"Did he ask for them? If so did he give any reason?" John Balance put the simple question in the tense court.

"He asked me for them. He said it was safe enough in the bush where he usually lived, but he didn't feel so secure on the railway where all the scallywags of the country collected. He also said that his fiancée would bring out a lot of wedding presents and that silver was almost irresistible to the native; it shone so, and could so easily be melted down and sold to native silver-smiths."

"One rather agrees with him," John Balance commented as he wrote. "Were any people with you when you gave the cartridges to the deceased? Or when he asked you for them?"

"Er no. No one was with us."

Paige-Thomas had signed and gone back to his seat. He, alone seemed undisturbed. Bennerton looked shocked, Marren angry, glaring at his Manager. Others appeared grave and anxious.

"I ought to add that Culver asked me for the cartridges in the office. The next day, again in the office, I gave them to him."

"Would the clerks behind the partition have heard you? Or might they have seen the cartridges?" Balance was convinced the Manager was hiding something.

"No. At least I don't think so. The typewriter would have stopped clicking if they had been listening." Winchester was clearly angry, though trying not to show it. "He put the cartridges into his coat pocket."

Two slips in that, thought Balance as he wrote it down. What made him remember after several days that the typewriter had not stopped clicking in the course of what must then have seemed a very unimportant conversation? And as to the coat . . . but there might be some explanation there. Worth asking.

"Did the deceased not work in his shirt sleeves?" Sounded viciously pointed, but that couldn't be helped.

"He usually took off his coat, but was wearing it that day."

Bald and unconvincing, thought Balance. What a poor liar the man was!

"Can you throw any further light on anything in connection with the cartridges?"

The Manager could not. Once more he signed, and retired to his seat.

John Balance arranged his notes, checked through where he had omitted to in one or two places; slowly and carefully, then added his signature and attestation.

He worked slowly, because he was trying to make up his mind.

The Europeans on this mine had been an unusually

happy family—allowing of course for climate and hard conditions of service. Now they seemed well on their way to the belief that Winchester had murdered his own Accountant. That he had made some pretext to shoot him with the man's own revolver, taking down the ammunition for the purpose, intending to make it look like suicide. One short sentence read out from the Court Minutes and its implication carefully explained, would free Winchester from suspicion. Even that wasn't necessary. They could be made to see with their own eyes.

Balance, accustomed to the conditions in many diverse courts, did not need to look up from his minutes to perceive that the suspicion which Winchester had aroused had hardened into condemnation. Condemnation on one bare item of circumstantial evidence? Surely not! Obviously something was known to the onlookers which had not been divulged in Court. What? A motive, probably. A threat of violence, perhaps, such as Olafson, still too drunk to attend court, had offered yesterday morning.

In the tense court Winchester cleared his throat self-consciously, almost challengingly.

No! John Balance decided. Winchester could remain under the suspicion of his friends. Then perhaps one of them would come forward with the information that they now hid from the court.

"*The Court finds,*" formally the District Officer pronounced his judgment, recording it as he spoke, "*that James Clarence Culver died of cause or causes unknown. That in the opinion of this Court, burning was not the primary cause of his death.*"

He pinned the sheet on top of the others, and rose. "That is all, thank you."

CHAPTER XI

AWKWARDLY the Court broke up. People put on their coats hesitatingly, as though they expected something further to occur. John Balance, giving instructions to his *dogaris*, noted this with an inward smile. Did they expect him to issue a warrant for arrest on the spot?

There was no grouping for discussion outside. Silently and separately each man went his way. By the time the D.O. had verified that the further doors were properly bolted from within, Winchester too had gone. Chairs and table were carried outside by the *dogaris*, the steel doors were banged-to and padlocked, and John Balance turned to his men. "I leave you," he spoke in Hausa. "Watch carefully. Let no man enter, neither white nor black save only those that shall bear away the body to burial. And see that they touch nought save the body. Here is the key."

His horse and horse-boy waited for him in the shade of a tree. Giving his sheaf of papers to the boy with a word of caution, he mounted. Just under half a mile to the rest-house. A two o'clock sun that glared on the ground and made clothes and helmet feel like hot stove-pipes. A dry and gummy mouth due to last night's carouse and the hot and trying hours in tin-store court house. But things had begun to happen, lines for enquiry to suggest themselves.

Cheerfully John Balance shook his pony into a canter. The horseboy on foot pattered gently along behind; it was too hot to run fast enough to keep up.

"Alhassan, old horse! Lend me your counsel."

Alhassan The Beautiful cocked his ears back at the sound of his name. "The snuff-box was not in the place by Culver's doorway when we had drinks there. But it *was* when we rushed out to rescue him. How do we find the owner of that snuff-box? And how does he come into the story?

That woman—let all women be nameless O Hassan so that husbands may rest upon the couch of trust! Why did she say 'Save him' to the rescue party? From the rose bed at the end of the garden she could not see into the hut. Did she, though she does not admit it, go to the hut before she ran to call for help? Or did she know that Culver had not reached her house, and so, on that, plus the knowledge that his hut was on fire, jump to conclusions? Conclusions that in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of a thousand, O Hassan, would be wrong."

A white robed native bent down and touched hand to ground in dignified salutation. Alhassan shied gleefully across a ditch and up a bank.

CHAPTER XII

JOHN Balance lay back in his deck chair doing exactly and completely nothing. Like a drink to the thirsty, like a hot bath to the man cold and tired after a long walk, like morphia to the pain-ridden, is the peace of the evening after the long, tropical day.

In front of him the wall of the rest-house compound; a sign only, and no barrier, built of sun-dried mud to the height of two feet. Behind him the circular rest-house with its miniature verandah, and conical glass roof.

With the elaborate care of perfect laziness he watched the lesser egrets come home from their long day's work escorting herds of humped *Fulani* cattle. A few flew singly, but usually in little groups, in wedge formation, heads drawn in, legs stretched straight behind them. Little white birds, spruce and tidy, silent and dignified when pompously strutting around their chosen herd. But once they reached home what a change! They became, of a sudden, noisy and quarrelsome.

A *giginya* palm in the rest-house compound was the favourite roost of a score of these cow-birds. When the quarrelling of the birds was hushed for a moment, Alhassan could be heard munching his evening meal of guinea-corn at his picketing peg beneath the *dorowa* tree.

At how many hundred rest-houses, on hills, on plains, on the banks of rivers had John Balance heard these evening sounds! His servants at the back of the rest house talked in low tones. One of them played something with

the tinkling tones of a jew's harp. Always during the dry season the deck-chair would be placed outside where the faint evening breeze rose and died away. If possible whence the red sun could be seen flattened by the distorting refraction as it reached the horizon. Then the big fruit bats started in orderly procession, black silhouettes against the afterglow. Night after night they would pass in their thousands, always in the same direction from some invisible lie-up to some unknown feeding ground.

John Balance drew deep breaths of peace and satisfaction as the oppression of the tropical day lifted.

In a moment or two the houseboy would appear; first with a camp table, then with a tray of drinks and the lamp, which he would put upon the table. Then he would ask whether dinner was to be laid out doors or in. A faint shadow was thrown before. It grew more distinct as a light from behind came closer. Surely Amadu would not bring the lamp before the table. The table always came first, always had done, for years past. Something must have upset the man. Perhaps his wife had got another baby. But no. Her next wasn't due till February and in the meantime she had run away with another man.

Amadu put the lamp on the ground and hastened back for the forgotten table. One more journey and the drinks were set out. Amadu poured the usual carefully gauged whiskey, then soda from the sparklet bottle. Balance took a short drink, and placed the glass on the ground beside him. Official and home mail lay on the footrest waiting to be opened. The inquest had taken till three o'clock. Lunch wasn't over till after four. Then he had needed to bath and change for the burial, and reach the little cemetery shortly before five.

He picked up his hunting knife, and slit open the envelopes, sorting them neatly into two piles, official and personal, before beginning to read.

Amadu said something.

"Yes, outside. But not under the trees where the birds are," John Balance answered automatically, and turned his thoughts back to the paper he was reading.

Amadu repeated his announcement.

"A girl wants to see me? I do not see girls except in the morning when my table is spread for office. This you know."

Amadu still waited.

"Further news?" Balance sounded irritable.

"She is here. Also her dog, which is a white man's dog." Amadu's introduction was non-committal, but a little husky with apprehension. He wished to convey the idea that the girl had come of her own accord, that he, Amadu completely disassociated himself with such disobedience. That nevertheless a dog of the kind which white men own being with the girl might somehow prove an extenuating feature.

"*Sannu*, greetings," a doll-like figure came into the lamplight and dropped into the curtsey of the native women. "It is I, Hatasu."

"Oh, only Hatasu!" John Balance sounded relieved. "It is well. I thought it was one come to trouble me, as is the habit of women. This child is no matter. I will have her news. Then she shall go."

The houseboy departed rejoicing. His master had a wide stock of authentic native proverbs that bit the disobedient or the careless, and when these were exhausted or failed to reach the mark, a diabolical gift in inventing more. And

the invented ones were worse, much worse, than the real ones. Amadu cocked his fez further towards the back of his head as he retired, hoping his luck would hold.

Hatasu waited, sunk in the position of curtsy, hands on thin, bare knees, head inclined till John Balance could see the big centre ridge of her elaborate hairdressing circled by the colourful headcloth.

She had picked up good manners from someone,—scarcely from Culver, who would be unlikely to know the correct native formalities. Balance was pleased and rather surprised. Her visit to him in the early hours of the morning in the Manager's house had shown courage and enterprise, but scarcely a regard for the conventions of life!

"You have come to talk?"

The head ducked in a nod of assent.

"Then sit, that you may speak the more easily."

The girl curled, half sitting, half reclining, into a comfortable position. The tubby, white terrier came in from the darkness as if now assured of welcome.

"The end that we seek, is it yet found?" Hatasu wrinkled up her eyes, peered out beyond the circle of light.

"None listens from the darkness," John Balance reassured her. "The leopard that killed is still unknown. I have crossed trails such as leopards make, but of none of them can I say 'This is the trail of the leopard that killed.' But I can say, 'Here are trails. Let me follow and see if any lead back to the kill.'" The District Officer had dropped into a metaphor that he thought the child would appreciate.

Maitumbi, the terrier, sniffed at the papers on the foot-rest, then leant back slightly on its hind legs. Hatasu, guessing his plan, caught him just before he sprang. White-

men's papers are important things not intended as bedding for fat, white terriers. In a whisper, but severely, she told him so, and pulled him closely to her.

The girl looked up, as if to speak to Balance but changed her mind, and with her unoccupied hand picked up a pebble and began to play with it.

John Balance put down his paper and reached out for his glass. On the previous night a desire for vengeance had led her to search out a stranger in a strange house and in the darkness. But now that the first motive force was spent, she was afraid, and hesitated. No use to hurry her.

Balance sipped at his drink. It wouldn't do only to pretend to drink. The funny little person might notice and draw some inconsequent but quite final and damning conclusion from it—that he was deceitful, for instance. He saw her look up at him, from under her eyebrows, then as swiftly look down again. What were the tests by which she was judging? He found himself hoping, with absurd anxiety, for a favourable judgment.

The situation was becoming absurd! He transferred the glass to his left hand, and was about to pick up a letter; then changed his mind. Instead he groped out in seeming carelessness and gave a friendly tug at one of the terrier's silky, black ears. No result.

With elaborate casualness he tickled the dog's whiskers and his nose. Maitumbi sneezed.

Hatasu laughed. A short, low note, rather embarrassed. She wriggled and her silver necklace swung between her little, unformed breasts. Then she gave the dog a gentle slap of finality and broke silence.

"What was easy when the fire was hot is hard now that the ashes are cold! And now that my Kalava is buried

I fear you."

"Do no wrong, and fear me not."

"Almost with those words do men speak of you in the village—but still they fear you; fear you more than I do."

"Doubtless they do. For many of them do wrong between each rising and setting of the sun, and break even the laws between one market day and the next." How did one set about re-assuring this scrap of a woman?

"I have not to-day broken the laws, nor, I think," very gravely, "done such wrong as might be punished . . ." another pause for self-examination.

The D.O. leant over to the table on his left and poured himself out another whiskey and soda. Last night the child had developed the interview along quaint lines, but had definitely made her point and achieved the aim she intended. Worth waiting, anyhow to see what happened.

"Now the *Sarkin Fawa*, the chief butcher of the village drinks strong drink, breaking the Sharia of the Prophet Mahomed. And when the Market Head reproaches him, what does he say?"

It was clearly a rhetorical question. Balance kept silence.

"He says, 'A goat is sinful, and his throat is cut. A ram is not sinful, but his throat also is cut. Why should I be a sheep and gain nothing, or fear to be a goat and lose nothing?' The *Sarkin Fawa* is an old man, and truthful—for a butcher! Is his saying true?"

"You speak, girl, like a scribe learned in theology. How shall I unravel your parable?" He scanned the brown face with its little pug nose. It looked disappointed. He relented.

"No girl, but only small boys are as innocent as the sheep to which you compare yourself. But even a small

goat such as you undoubtedly are . . . ” Balance saw the child grin, “ will be safe while I am the butcher in this market.”

“ *Yowwa!* You are one who understands.” Hatasu gave a jump of excitement as she sat. She drew a little closer to this white man who could solve riddles. “ *Madalla!* We will find this killer, surely, you and I! Now, indeed, I will tell what I know, if you assent.”

The test was over. The D.O. took the cherrywood pipe from his mouth and was about to knock it out. He lit it instead. He must have filled it when Amadu brought the light. So she had kept him so intent on passing her tests that he had forgotten to light his pipe! He looked wonderingly at the child, from her bare legs, the awning striped cloth scantily covering her middle, to her ornately plaited hair with the gaudy headcloth. His admiration for her deepened. She might possibly be a useful addition to *dogaris* and similar official helpers.

“ Now 'Tumbi here would have slept in the house of the Manager till the sun rose,” the girl picked a crawling ant off the lazy terrier. “ Only I could not fold up the white cloth that you had spread over us, as he lay on it. So I woke him. Then when I closed the door to leave him, he would have barked. It was still dark, before dawn, though I could feel dawn was near . . . ”

Balance nodded. He knew the feeling well.

“ I only knew the way by which I came. ‘ If Maitumbi barks,’ I said, ‘ the Manager will wake and catch me as I pass his door.’ So I took 'Tumbi with me; carrying him, one hand to his mouth. And again I feared!” She looked uncertainly at the dog and at Balance, “ But I did not steal him. See, I have brought him back, for he is a white man’s

dog. Moreover I have no money to feed him, and he eats like a white man."

"He eats too much. He is greedy, like the fish that drank up the river, and so was caught by the fisherman."

"Heehee! Ho! Ho!" Hatasu was tickled. "I had not heard that saying. Whence comes it?"

"No matter. Tell your story, for being a white man I soon must eat."

"All white men are so, eating often, but eating little. Not as we do, who eat much but seldom." Hatasu paused, and the D.O. feared further irrelevances. But the girl had a knack of turning a conversational blind alley into a by-pass. "White men are difficult to understand. Wherefore it is good that you can help search for the killer of Kalava, since it may be the killer is a white man."

Balance's face did not show if he appreciated the compliment. He was watching the child closely, eyes narrowed slightly to shade them from the lamplight. Something puzzled him about her. Not her words. Her manner perhaps. Though she still talked to the point she now seemed pre-occupied.

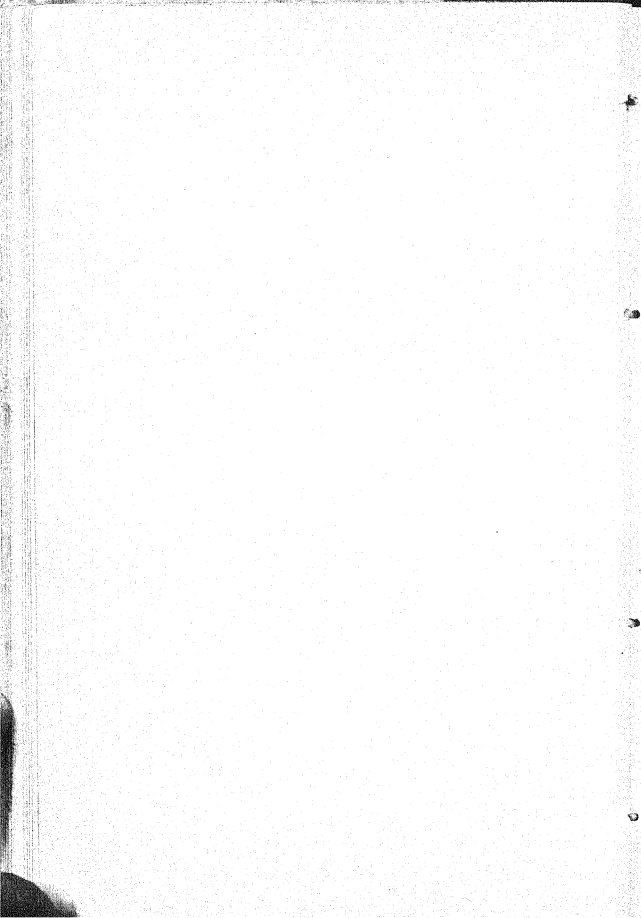
She lifted Maitumbi's nose from the ground, the terrier grunting in sleepy protest. She raised it higher, till the nose pointed behind the white man's left shoulder. She was saying something, but Balance scarcely listened. With elaborate carelessness he put his half-smoked pipe on the table, let his feet slip from footrest to ground.

Hatasu still chattering approved his preparations with a barely perceptible nod.

Leaning forward, as though to listen more closely, he gripped the arms of his chair. Then, with a leap, he was on his feet, and racing into the darkness. Something fled

before him, a man by the sound. The object at which 'Tumbi's nose had pointed, the danger of which Hatasu had so ingeniously warned him. Still blinded by the lamp-light, unarmed, he rushed onward in pursuit.

PART III



CHAPTER XIII

HATASU'S warning was skillful and John Balance had, in his favour, the element of surprise. Almost together he and the intruder leaped the low wall of the rest house compound. The wall, scarcely visible, could be guessed at but the object of the chase was a moving blur, a shadow in the darkness. Balance grabbed at it, missed, turned a somersault, and scrambling up, was in pursuit again. Enough delay, however, for the quarry to be lost to sight. A futile rush in what Balance judged to be the right direction, took him only a few yards. This time he tripped and pitched painfully on one shoulder.

Philosophically he accepted failure, listened a moment, but could hear nothing, then turned to pick his way back towards the gleam of his own light.

Hatasu, unperturbed, still waited. "I did not bring aid to you, not knowing your wishes. Also I held 'Tumbi lest he might think it play and bite your hurried heels."

"Quick thought, and good!" Balance sat down and resumed his pipe. "And the man?"

"Twice he came, so that the rays of the lamp just reached him," Hatasu explained. "But I thought he was

perhaps one of your household. Then the third time he came closer and with more stealth. If I had told you, he would have heard. If I had whispered or pointed, he would have been warned. So I made 'Tumbi point, though he knew it not. Now may I tell my story?"

"But who was the listener?"

"I did not see. He wore no turban and no light clothes, but there was something white in his left hand, perhaps his white robe that he had taken off and rolled up, as a thief will. When he came there was a sound . . . *flik! flik! flik!* such as the stiff cotton trousers of the white man make, but his feet were bare and made no sound."

John Balance tried to assemble the data, to put the pieces of the picture together. Bare feet—that ruled out Europeans, not that they were a probability anyway. Cotton drill trousers, khaki ones, or they would have shown up more—that wiped out almost any native except a clerk or other person denationalised by close contact with the white man. More likely to be a servant or horseboy, or even a headman of labourers on the Mine. Clerks are mostly 'downcountry' people accustomed to wearing shoes and sun-helmets as white men do.

There was nothing to be done. The rest-house was on the outskirts of the native village. By now the intruder was probably sitting in one of those peaceful groups that gossiped at the house-doors in the cool of the evening. Puzzling though! What could the man have wanted?

"John is here!" Hatasu announced her thrilling discovery.

"Where?" John Balance looked cautiously round him. "What John? Who?"

"John the boy of Kalava, who should have gone with

the loads in the lorry. I saw him start from the Mine. He sat with the driver and had his umbrella and waterbottle as though he were travelling far. Moreover . . . " Hatasu emphasised the point, "It was known that he was to go to Railhead, for the wife of the Manager's cook asked John to buy her perfume, such as the canteens sell, and gave him money even as the lorry started." She leant back on her heels to judge of the effect she had produced.

"Or gave the money to the lorry driver? Such is often done."

"To John she gave it. I saw with my eyes. Also, would Kalava have sent his loads unattended that thieves might take whatever they willed?" Maitumbi received a thump of emphasis. "And this John is in the village here, for to-day I have seen him."

"Tell me from the beginning, and not as the woman who said, 'I have seven sons, and behold I am now married and my father seeks a suitor for me!'"

"Hoho! That too I had not heard! But I shall now remember. Also . . . hoho! . . . the saying as to the greedy fish." Hatasu was an appreciative audience. Her eyes wrinkled amusingly as she laughed.

"Start with the suitor, then. But hasten. For soon I will call for my dinner, and then you must return to the village to your friends."

"I left your room so that the Manager's servants, bringing your early morning tea, should not find me there. It is *we* who will question *others* these days concerning the Kalava matter, not ourselves be questioned! I did not want to wait to be questioned by others. It was cold outside. Tsrre! It was cold! But the stars had almost gone, so I knew that dawn was near. Your *dogaris* had a small fire

burning and were wakeful. The fire looked warm, so I went towards it. But I thought, 'They will question me,' so I turned off.

"The people in the village, and even the labourers on the Mine would have talked much concerning the fire and the death of the white-man. But now they would be sleeping, each inside his hut with the door fastened. But in the market there are always people tying their loads before dawn, so that they may reach the next town before the sun is hot."

Hatasu paused to see if her audience was attending. Balance had filled and lighted another pipe, and lay relaxed and comfortable, watching the stars. A steady thud, thud came from the women pounding corn, and from the mosque in the middle of the village the *ladan* called to prayer in a high-pitched, quavering wail. She listened till the last phrase of the call died away.

"There in the market I sought news. But men knotting bundles with cold fingers do not talk. So I waited awhile, warming myself at a fire they had. And when they put on their sandals and picked up their staffs I watched them go and said nothing. But I added more fuel to the fire, corn stalks, old matting, and such other rubbish as I found in the empty market stalls. And waited. After those traders went, none came to the market save dogs and one goat. The sun rose, and I was very lonely, for no smoke showed above the houses, and surely everyone was dead! And I would have wept, but for little 'Tumbi here, who lay between me and the fire, leaning against my knees.

"At last came people to the market, and I moved from place to place listening. Now had it been a theft people would have said, 'It is the work of So-and-so!' and another

would have said, 'No, but of Such-a-one, who was seen only last week not two hours distant.' And they would have disputed, and I should have heard much. But if one man told of the fire, the listener would say, 'Indeed?'; and if the teller told of the death of the white man, the listener would say, 'Allah preserve us!' Only one woman spoke much about the fire. She showed the pink weals on her arms, and told how once the ground-nut oil that she was making over the fire had caught light, and burnt her hut and the huts of many neighbours. And she warned all those whom she met to use pots that are neither new and untested, nor old and brittle, when making oil over the fire. Doubtless, she said, the white man had also been making ground-nut oil. She was very old."

"It was then, as the old woman talked, late into the morning. And I had not eaten nor drunk. So I thought of Mariamu, a friend of Kalava, who lived in a house of many women. She would give me a little *kunu* to drink, and perchance would have news, for all stories are told to a *karua*, a prostitute. Is it not so?"

Among primitive people sex relationships and sex acts are discussed and judged as openly and simply as any other facts of life, not set apart under traditional tabu. It did not occur to John Balance to be shocked at the child's knowledge. But he began to guess the end of the story, and gave it his closest attention.

"The house, which belongs to a *Yoruba* from Ibadan, is near the market, behind the spice stalls. As I drew near I saw her sitting by the door in a chair much as white men use. For *karuas* neither pound corn nor grind corn, and seldom cook. Then I saw that she spoke with a man. And that man was John!"

Quickly the D.O. summed up the data. Culver killed on the day that John deserted from his employ. The morning after the event the same boy seen again in the company of a woman said to have been a "friend" of the dead Culver.

"And then? . . . " John Balance wanted the end of the story. Hatasu seemed inclined to stop at her dramatic climax.

"Here was a riddle I could not understand. So I turned, unseen by them, and went in search of you. But you were no longer at the house of the Manager. And when I came here you had not returned from the burying. So I told Amadu, your house servant, that I brought back your dog which was Kalava's, but would give him to none save you. At first he would not permit. But I said, 'How else will the white man know that I have not stolen the dog? Have pity!' So he pitied me," the child grinned widely. "That is all."

John Balance stood up and stretched. Lazily he called the servant.

"Amadu, my light coloured dressing-gown and old tennis shoes. I will walk a little and drink the breeze." John Balance tidied up the papers, slipped the hunting knife into its sheath and hung it on his belt. Then Amadu re-appeared.

"Give this girl food and such other things she may need."

Balance slid into the dressing-gown, once perhaps a ghastly mauve, but now white with age, and for lack of buttons fastened it loosely with the cord. The shoes looked older still, discoloured, laceless, the heels trodden inwards like a persian slipper. At three yards' distance the white-robed shape might well have been a native in his long riga. The walk too had changed to the sliding stride of a man in sandals.

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"My own food, and my bath water, see that they are kept warm till I return." The instructions came from the darkness. Swift, but unhurried, John Balance was already in action.

*This gives no look gives
no clue to one's purpose.
signature of the reader.
Ashukla.*

CHAPTER XIV

WITH the *slop-slop, swish-swish* of a sandalled native John Balance swung down the wide unmetalled track leading towards the village of Mafun.

At first all was darkness. But gradually outlines began to appear against the faintly luminous sky. On his left, he knew, was an open space which had been a field of guinea-corn. He caught his toe against a root and cursed in Hausa. As usual the farm had encroached on the road-way. When the road is of the same soil as the farm, but the richer for lying fallow for some years, the temptation is irresistible to the peasant. Country roads, designed for occasional motor traffic during the dry season, often spend much of their life bearing cornstalks ten feet high, the stems like thick bamboos. When harvest time comes each corn-stalk is felled nine inches or so from the base by a blow from a heavy knife. The result is a natural caltrop—a sharp spike stayed immovably to the ground and very painful to horses or bare feet.

The white man's toes, in their thin tennis-shoes again met an invisible obstruction, met it most painfully. Balance swore, smiled grimly in the darkness, and promised himself a few words with the Village Head; that venerable chieftain who for little pay but much prestige is responsible for the effective government of his village and its surrounding countryside.

The District Officer poked around in the dusk till he

found the tennis shoe, and slipped his foot into it again. His curious dress was a tested compromise between ordinary European clothes and native disguise. From a few yards distance in the dusk, he had the shape, the movement, even the sound of a native. This made it possible for him to wander through strange villages at night without attracting notice. Groups of gossipers would continue to gossip careless of his approach. People would not leave their tasks and amusements to hasten forward and prostrate themselves in salutation. Children would not cluster finger in mouth to scrutinise the stranger, nor would *dogaris* and minor officials escort him as if on ceremonial parade. Bath-gown and tennis shoes were the whimsical means that enabled him to observe the real life of the native, off parade, as it were, and un-selfconscious. Full disguise he had used on occasion, but such would not suit his present quest.

The District Officer hummed a little tune to himself as he strode along. The song of the love-making of *Dan Sariikin Agadas*. A quavery, little chant, half recitative, on a scale quite foreign to the European ear but built to a rhythm which suited the women as they pounded corn in their heavy wooden mortars.

The track narrowed between mud walls as it entered the village. A rubbish tip, though hidden in the dark, still found means to advertise its presence. Above this a sharper smell hung on the heavy evening air. The acrid smoke which belonged to some nearby dye-pit. The walls on right and left gave way to matting fences, set flush with the open doorways of round huts that formed entrance porches to compounds. Conical peaks, the roofs of round huts inside the enclosures, made black triangles on which the sky appeared to rest.

The District Officer passed within a yard of a group of men beside the black oblong of an entrance doorway. They reclined, chatting on the dry ground. A dark shadow showed against a white robe; doubtless a small, dusty, and naked child sitting on the knee of one of the men. Children in these parts have no fixed bedtime, but sleep, like healthy animals, whenever a comfortable spot in the shade, a warm fire, or an active digestion makes sleep attractive.

Balance passed without exciting comment. He heard a lazy voice murmur, "So I said to him 'You! Who owe me three shillings and sevenpence!' He denied, but troubled me no more."

The District Officer smiled to himself as he went forward out of earshot. How like native conversation was to that of white men. The boring account of some petty, personal triumph was common to both.

Ahead of him a dull red glow from the right picked out the outline of the houses on the left. The acrid smoke thickened. A high, mud wall, surmounted by spikes of thorny boughs as a thief-deterrent, swung away to the right, leaving an open space in which fires glowed among irregularly shaped mounds. The dye-pits, well-like holes lined with white plaster; the mounds would be honeycombed with them, some empty, some filled with a purply green mash of indigo surfaced with iridescent scum. The smoke oozed from stacks of the waste products moulded by hand into cakes, sundried, and now being burned for the sake of the white ash.

The road was unfamiliar to Balance. From the rest-house to the Mine, and back, he had taken short cuts, never come this way. But the life of one village of farmers and traders is much like that of another, and in consequence the

villages themselves grow to similar shape, and all big roads lead to a similar market place.

After the dye-pits came more houses, several with little groups of peaceful idling gossipers at the open door. Gradually, as John Balance expected, the walls grew taller. The entrance porches would be square, flat-roofed, ornamented no doubt with patterns in geometrical design, but it was too dark to see them. High walls meant dwellings of the higher classes and therefore the centre of the village. The smell of horses came from a drainage hole cut through the base of a high blank wall. Another sign of affluence! No gossipers at doorways here. Owners of such houses hold what amount to petty courts in audience rooms within their compounds. Relatives, dependents, those who have received favours from the master of the house, or hope for favours in the future, call morning and evening, to pay their respects. There they receive kola nuts, which they chew, or if old and toothless, cut into shreds and suck, whilst in return they form an appreciative though in no wise servile audience to the great. High walls penned in the road on either side, encroached upon it till it became little more than a passage-way. They penned in, too, the hot air of the day, the smells of smoke, decaying matter, foodstuffs and spices. John Balance cleared his nose loudly, native fashion, and spat.

But the air freshened. Either a cross road or open space lay ahead. He wondered which it would be.

Then he found himself out in the square. A large tree showed as a black blur against the faintly luminous sky. Such ancient trees often stand before the homes of native chiefs. This one did. As he stumbled across its gnarled roots, he saw the square entrance porch flanked by massive,

mud buttresses. Like a black tunnel, blacker even than the surrounding darkness, the entrance passage pierced the gate-house; wide enough for the motors of to-day, high enough for the loaded camels and mounted horsemen of the past.

A cough sounded from the darkness, then a challenging "Wanene? Who's that?"

In reply John Balance struck a match. The light showed him a *dogari*, and showed the *dogari* the District Officer. Time and argument were saved.

"Call another man to take your watch," John Balance ordered, "then come with me. I wait here."

The *dogari* turned without further word and the stump, stump of his long stick and the swish of his gown passed out of the tunnel and were lost in the open air of an inside court-yard.

One minute, two minutes John Balance waited. No passer-by called him to his duty as a sentry. He fingered the rough, mud walls and wondered how old the building was. Some of these villages, though raided in warfare, and even deserted for long periods, are as old as the more famous walled towns of Emirs. This place might well go back to the bad old days before the Mohammedan conquerors had sloughed the many unorthodox practices they had picked up from the indigenous population. When human sacrifices, usually a virgin boy and virgin girl, were immured alive in the pillars of an entrance-hall. Pleasant thought! He stopped tapping at the wall.

Voices and steps approached. Balance feared it might be the Village Head himself coming out to pay his respects. Which would call for explanations and ceremonious delay. But it was only the first *dogari* returning with his relief.

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By luck, or with unusual tact, he had not informed the Chief.

"Handcuffs?" John Balance enquired.

The *dogari* held up his stick to which the steel gyves were fastened by the usual strip of cloth. A strange but convenient way of carrying them as a slight tug rips them off ready for action. Though invisible in the darkness the clink of the steel answered the enquiry.

"Good! Follow, then!"

CHAPTER XV.

AFTER the wait in the gatehouse of the Village Head's compound, the square seemed cool and fresh. Bats were twittering in the big tree. The haze of *harmattan*, the hot desert wind of the dry season, covered the sky, and blotted out all stars.

When John Balance was clear of the gate, clear of the big tree round whose roots might be some idlers half asleep in the warm night, he turned to his companion.

"We seek John, servant of the white man who died last night."

The *dogari* was surprised. John Balance's keen ear detected a barely perceptible break in the rhythm of his companion's stride.

"Very good! He has returned, then, since he went away on the 'moto' yesterday?"

"He did not go, but lodged last night in this town."

They were silent again, as they reached the further side of the square and approached the market stalls. Spots of red light and the scent of smoke showed that people still lingered, or had just left. Strangers who come to market often in the dry season spend the night in the market stalls, thus saving the cost of lodgings, which otherwise cuts heavily into their meagre profits. With a few amusing companions, a small fire, and story-telling, the night passes comfortably. Also they find companions of the road for the dawn start of the next day's journey.

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It would have been easy to skirt the stalls had Balance wished. But the night was dark, and any wakeful traders would be facing their little fires of market trash, so discovery was unlikely. One or two heads looked up curiously from the ground as they passed and muttered careless salutations to the *dogari*. The District Officer left the policeman to reply, and picked his way between shapeless bundles of sleeping men and women wrapped in long, native cloths, and equally shapeless bundles of merchandise ready packed for the dawn trek.

A gap through the long lines of stalls led them to an opening out of the square. Balance waited for the *dogari* to come up, since he had gone as far as he was sure of the way. The house he sought should be somewhere just ahead.

"Show me the house of a *Yoruba* where live certain 'worthless women'."

White men, particularly officials, do not usually ask to be guided to the lodgings of native 'ladies of leisure.' But the *dogari* made no comment. Perhaps he took the request as just one of the many incomprehensible follies of white men, such as setting up a net and laboriously knocking balls over it with the utmost excitement as a child might, or drinking and eating things which Mahomet in his wisdom prohibited.

The *dogari* led the way to a back street where the houses stood separately, with no more than an occasional fence of matting to separate the road from the land on which the houses stood. Clearly they had reached a quarter of the village where strangers lived. The Haussas would have walls or really sound matting fences, not these mere symbols of privacy. Then the *dogari* halted.

"Behold the house that you seek, where that lamp stands

on a box. And . . . " he coughed deprecatingly.

"And what?"

"And Mariamu, who is from the south, is well used to the ways of the white men . . .," he stopped, embarrassed, but hopeful.

"And is doubtless beautiful? . . . Hummh! But such is not my way. So wait here."

Leaving the *dogari*, John Balance crossed to the side of the road nearest the house. John, his namesake, might be inside the house, and if warned would escape by some back way into the night. If a *dogari*, or, still more, the District Officer were recognised, John would be warned. The problem was difficult. It had occurred to him that he might put a cordon of *dogari* round the house before making enquiries, much as a poacher nets a rabbit warren before putting in the ferret. It was in fact the obvious way. But if John were not caught in the net, the news of the raid would reach the man wherever he hid, putting him on his guard, or giving him ample warning for flight.

Carelessly Balance sauntered past the open space in front of the lamp, wavered in his stride as though tempted to stop, then went on. His hesitation had attracted the attention he courted. Three women were sitting in deck chairs round the lamp, talking and smoking. The smell of their cheap, imported, Virginian cigarettes reached him across the eight or ten yards that separated him from the "ladies of leisure." Also light from the cheap hurricane lamp discovered him to the group, and the talk ceased.

So far, so good! John Balance walked on a hundred yards, waited a moment, then turned back.

This time he walked still more slowly. Arrived opposite the light, his hesitation was positively painful to see, and

raised a titter of amusement. With difficulty he reached the cover of the next-door fence, and then the sound of his footsteps ceased.

He noted that the interrupted conversation had not been resumed. He paused awhile, then called softly back.

"Mariamu!"

There was a laugh at his expense. Then a voice replied.

"Tom-cat, come in out of the dark! Here is food such as tom-cats desire, oh tom-cat!"

He shuffled his feet, as though in indecision, then called again. There was another laugh at his expense. But a second voice, soft and attractive, answered.

"*La Illah!* These men!" A rickety chair creaked. "Wait thou! I come."

John Balance coughed discreetly, moved on a few paces and waited.

More than a minute passed, and no one came. John Balance became anxious. Had his scheme failed to work? Then a crisp, light tread ran down the slight slope from the house, broke into a more sedate pace on reaching the road, and turned in his direction. As it drew near it faltered.

"Behold me," the District Officer, his eyes more accustomed to the dark, moved towards the woman.

"Who is it who asks for me?" It was the owner of the second voice, not the one who had called him a tom-cat. John Balance was glad.

"You are indeed the Mariamu of whom men speak?" Balance softened the r's of his speech almost to l's, as a native of the Southern Provinces will. "I am a stranger, who arrived yesterday, and must go forward when my trade is finished." His best Hausa, Balance knew, could not pass on close attention for the speech of a native born.

As he spoke, the white man had manœuvred so that they were walking away from the house towards the spot where the *dogari* should be waiting. Faint perfume, fresh and attractive came from the dim figure at his side. With careful judgment, and some luck, he almost walked into the man, and, as his new companion shrank back modestly, gave a sharp tug at the *dogari's* robe as a sign to follow.

On the return journey the supposed trader avoided the market stalls by swinging more to his right. At the further side of the square an argument developed, and a couple of shillings changed hands. There was a halt while Mariamu took off her silken headcloth and made the man hold it, while she stowed the money in her tightly woven hair. As reward the trader was expected to indulge in a little playfulness. He ransacked his mind for knowledge of native custom, added some practical touches drawn from his own indiscreet youth, remembered with regret that natives do not kiss.

Apparently he acquitted himself well. As he broke out of the clinch an encore was demanded; was softly begged, but regretfully refused. Somewhere in the background was a much puzzled *dogari*, possibly even a horrified *dogari*, though that seemed unlikely; he could only hear, not see them in the dark.

He pulled himself together and answered a question . . . "Yes, but not far. A big house lying to the right beyond a cornfield."

"But that is the dismounting place of the white men. A rest-house. *Shafo*, the hawk, sleeps there. He came yesterday, *Shafo* himself." Mariamu's voice tightened in fear.

"*Shafo* is not there. Last night he slept at the house of

the Manager, as all men know."

His deep, calm voice soothed the frightened girl. She walked more closely at his side, pressing against him for reassurance. He could feel the disturbing warmth of her body through her thin cloth, and his arm around her, as she snuggled up to him, marked the rise and fall of her rounded hip.

He swallowed and noticed with annoyance how dry his mouth was; mentally cursed the tropics, celibacy and feminine allurements. He would have to pay for this with sleepless nights and sex-ridden days. In no way was this adventure to his liking. But it was nearly at an end. Her willingness to answer his call had suggested that John his namesake had probably left her house. And if not she was too far away to warn him. Now was the time for a few discreet enquiries.

"From what country are you, Mariamu?"

"Lokoja, but long, long ago. And you too are from the south? For your clothes are such as in the north here only white men or clerks or *boyiboyi*—servants—wear." She stopped, and fingered his bathrobe, his collarless shirt. "Also your speech is of the south, not Hausa of the Haussas."

"Are there many from the south here?" Balance evaded her question. "There is one named John, whom I seek. He is from the south, and works perhaps for the Big Man of the Mine, the Manager, for his master, I know, pays much money and . . ."

"Not the Manager, but the Paymaster, Kalava. The Manager does not pay money!" She laughed at his ignorance. "But how should a stranger know? Only, you will not find this John whom you seek. Yesterday he came to

me, and again last night. Worthless fellow! For this morning he said he had no money!" She clenched her hand on Balance's wrist in anger, as they stood, and turned to face him. A quaint, little gesture, much as a child will put its feelings into dumb show.

"But then came a boy of one of the white men, as though seeking John. I do not know the boy, for he is with a white man who does not stay long at the Mine as do Kalava and the Manager. John said, 'I will seek a loan. Perhaps Saidu will give me a shilling, or even two,' and he went from the chair where we sat outside the house, and spoke to Saidu in the road."

She was still holding John Balance by the wrist, and as she spoke would have pressed closely to him, face to face. Fearing discovery, John Balance retreated, and again retreated. But that would arouse suspicion if he kept it up. After all, he was supposed to be the gallant lover.

It would soon be over now, and would do no harm. Caressingly he turned her half around, pulled her back against him; leant his chin on her delightful, bare shoulder, his head against her ear and cheek. This way she couldn't turn her head to see him. She rubbed her head against his as she spoke, and he felt her ear-ring roll against his cheek.

"Then Saidu talked and pointed back towards the Mine," her voice came out of the dusk, "and John showed great fear and would have spoken. But Saidu drew from his sleeve a handkerchief full of money and gave to John. All this I could see plainly. I waited for John to return with the money that he owed." Only half her attention was on her story. She pressed the palm of John Balance's hand on her bare waist, below the short, loose blouse which just covered her breasts. Faint perfume rose attractively from

her and something gleamed on her face within a few inches of John Balance's eyes, the silver nose-stud in her left nostril.

"Saidu turned and went, but John still waited in the road. I called to him, but he did not hear. Looking about him as one who fears, he went quickly out of sight. His slippers remained in the road and later I took them and will keep till he pays my debt. Only, I do not think he will return, for now men say that it was he who killed Kalava, the white man. Would that I knew where he has gone."

"Mariamu, is this the talk for a night when the air is warm, and man and woman are together?" John Balance had his information, and wanted to get back to his dinner and bath. "What talk is this, of other men? Come!"

In affected anger John Balance drew himself away and walked on, Mariamu silent—in apparent repentance at his heels.

The faint outline of the houses on the right disappeared and Balance knew they had come to the open cornfield near the rest house. As he turned to warn Mariamu of the stubble, she caught her toe, tripped, and grasped him with her soft, rounded arms. Recovering herself, she giggled, spluttered, and broke into clear, ringing laughter.

"Do not be angry," she continued to laugh as she spoke, her pose of repentance swept away. "To-day is to-day, and yesterday was but yesterday. Nor does the taste of yesterday's meal linger in the mouth. Only a . . . a fresh hunger!"

It would have been easy to disclose his identity, and then wish her a polite good-night. But this would frighten the girl, and set her wondering what he had wanted. Then, his enquiries about John might cause her to put two and two together and lead to her warning him. Balance knew

a better way.

They came within sight of the rest-house. She gave a little cry, and held back.

"But *Shafu* is there! Behold the light of his cook's fire burning, and the voices of his servants!"

"The white man is not there," Balance corrected her. "Only his servants, and, in the big hut which is without light, his many loads. Clothes, such as are easily sold. Doubtless also articles of silver, such as make bracelets when melted. Perhaps even money in a bag!"

"You are a thief!" Mariamu was not horrified. But surprised, and a little afraid; she shrank from him.

John Balance laughed. Quite a good imitation, he felt, of the villain in pantomime. This surprise *dénouement* ought to make her forget what she had told him so much about the other John. She began to untie her headcloth.

"I go. But first I will give you back your money."

"Had I been a trader as you first thought . . . but to me, what is money? *Shafu* has a bagful, two bagsful, to pay his carriers, and this will soon be mine. Here!" He caught her roughly to him, and tangled two more coins in her hair. "Keep this besides. But tell no one anything. For, if you betray me, and I am caught, I will swear you were with me; or if not caught, take such vengeance on you as is the way of robbers!"

Now the girl was loth to go. John Balance cursed inwardly. Well, if she liked cave-man tactics . . .

"I hear steps," roughly he swung her round to face the direction in which they had come. "I must hide within the house. Go swiftly!" A spank descended upon her where spanks usually do, and set her in motion.

Mariamu gave a squeak of surprise, then an excited little

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giggle as she made off home. Balance waited till the sound of her footsteps was lost. Till he heard her exchange greetings with the *dogari*. That was all right then, the man hadn't exceeded his authority and detained her. She would reach home safely.

Relieved he called for his bath. He could explain all that was necessary to the *dogari* while it was being prepared. But—curse women or the lack of 'em—how lonely the place seemed!

CHAPTER XVI

THE tin uniform case had been seared of its black enamel, the soldering had run, there were only charred traces of the extra, fitted, wooden bottom, and no trace remained of Culver's name in the usual large, white lettering.

The other cases had looked as hopelessly burnt out, but the contents, though charred to brittle blackness by the heat, had not actually been destroyed. Only, they had proved valueless for the enquiry. Their contents had been clothes, boots, sundries of all kinds. No papers.

With care, so as not to shake the contents, John Balance punched out the hinge of the brass hasp. Slowly, gently, he bent back the creaking lid on its heat corroded hinges. One glance at the contents, and he sat back on his heels to think.

Here were the papers he had been seeking. A whole boxful, mainly what appeared to be letters, not even in envelopes, but spread out tantalisingly flat as though for his convenience. But black and charred so that a rough touch, or even a strong draught, would destroy them beyond hope of reconstruction.

Moving the box from the Mine down to the rest-house had not disturbed the contents, Balance had made certain of that by supervising the removal in person. The top sheet had curled up slightly under the heat to meet the lid of the trunk. It showed the printed letter-heading of the Mafun Mine, though the rest of the sheet was blank. It might have been an unused sheet of paper, or a carbon copy of a

letter that Culver himself had written. The carbon copy theory seemed most probable. On close examination John Balance discovered two small marks, commas apparently, that had been inserted in pen and ink, and still showed on the black surface though the type imprint had gone. The sheet below was all in handwriting.

John Balance sat back again at a safe distance and breathed freely once more.

The chances were that the lower papers would be in a better state, packed down, and protected as they had been by the top layers. Tightly packed paper is amazingly hard to burn.

John Balance closed the lid carefully, and straightened up. The top papers were likely to be the most recent and for this reason must be saved. But how? He felt for his pipe, looked at his wrist watch, changed his mind and called for breakfast.

Rubbing his hand across his chin he entered the bedroom. The only real room in the rest-house, though sections of the verandah served as pantry and bathroom, its furnishing was primitive. Three black tin uniform cases, one chained and padlocked to the bed, as though it contained money and valuables. He had no valuables, and his money was kept for safety in packets of ammunition mixed among the tins of foodstuffs in the chopboxes. Two gun—or rather rifle-cases, a collapsible chair, a camp-bed, and an enamelled basin and washing articles completed the list of furniture.

John Balance had developed the kinks of all solitary men. He used for instance the same soap for shaving, washing and bathing; a rather costly lavender soap that he had used for years. He stropped his ancient cut-throat razor on a smooth and supple piece of stirrup leather which hung by

a leather bootlace from the head of the camp bed. As it had hung for years and in hundreds of different rest houses.

Satisfied with the lather, he walked up and down the room as he shaved, flicked the lather from his razor out through the open door. A six-inch helio mirror hung above the wash basin, a relic perhaps of an earlier, more normal John Balance, who shaved as do other men.

Preoccupied, he walked to the edge of the verandah and pulled a straw-like grass stem from the thatch. With the heel of the razor he cut it cleanly in two, examined the cross-section with care, and, satisfied, threw the stalk away. Having given the razor a final rub with the ball of his thumb, he put it away. Breakfast was announced as he hung the wet face-towel over the rods of the mosquito net.

The meal was out of doors, on a folding table near the picketing peg where Alhassan munched contentedly. A serious weekly paper stood propped against the coffee pot exactly as John Balance had left it on his breakfast table at the last rest house some seventeen miles away and the morning before last. A later issue, still in its wrapper lay beside it. But to-day the paper lay unnoticed. Even the fresh fish, an unusual dainty in this dry country, presented by the village head, received no more attention than a tinned bloater would have done. The sun had now risen above the shadow of the rest-house roof. Amadu brought a sun helmet and hung it on his master's head to shield the vulnerable base of the skull and neck. John Balance did not seem to notice anything.

He flung the coffee grains from his cup over the two foot wall of the compound, poured himself a final cup and lit his pipe.

"Amadu." At John Balance's call the boy was at his

side. "I require an empty whiskey bottle with a cork, a small bottle such as that of quinine medicine, the lid of a cigarette tin, a nail, and boiling water in a kettle. But first some gum such as is found in trees, of the clearest, whitest kind, as much as . . ." he hesitated . . . "will fill two cigarette tins."

Puzzled, but unenquiring, Amadu repeated the list for confirmation, then hurried off.

The table was cleared by Amadu's assistant while Amadu assembled the miscellaneous articles. As he waited for the gum to be collected from the trees, Balance started his preparations.

First he selected another stout grass stem from the rest-house thatch. Carefully he cuts its lowest section, and blew through it to make sure it was clear. From higher up he cut another length, like the first, but smaller in diameter. This too he tested and found clear from insects or other obstructions.

Laying the grass tubes across the lid of the tin at right angles to each other, he marked the rim in four places with his penknife, then punched holes with the nail and his shoe heel. With a little manœuvring he forced the grass tubes into the holes at right angles to each other, the end of the smaller tube directly in front of the orifice of the larger one. He surveyed the result with satisfaction, lit another pipe, and waited.

John Balance's primitive household ran like a simple, well-tended machine, largely because Balance knew what each member of the house ought to do. When he asked for gum from the trees, Amadu knew that he must without delay tell the horseboy to collect the gum. Consequently too, the horseboy knew that since the trees grew outside the

compound the task was his legitimate duty, and not that of the cook or houseboy. Unless, of course, he could discover an excuse.

Only two excuses occurred to the horseboy. He explained quickly to the cook that he had heard that white men used such gum in cooking, as a flavour. That for this purpose doubtless the white man now desired gum of the finest white gum. "But how should a mere tender of horses know what gums were good? Many must be deadly poisons. Surely it was intended that a cook, who knew all foodstuffs, a good cook, a cook with brains such as Curses upon cooks that are deaf and dumb! Upon cooks who stew out their non-existent brains over their foul smelling offal of food! Upon cooks whose straddling legs meet only at the in-turned big toes! Upon" The horseboy turned quite placidly from the equally unruffled but busy cook and went his way. It hadn't come off, but there was no ill feeling.

But the second houseboy, the 'small-boy' was just turning into the compound from some errand on which Amadu had sent him. The horseboy met him firmly.

"Hasten! For you have been long gone, and Amadu and also our master are angry with you." The horseboy relieved the urchin of the bundle on his head, and thrust the cloth Amadu had given him into his hand. "The master wants gum, white gum of the finest, gathered swiftly from the trees, and more swiftly still brought back."

The small boy was about to obey, when the horseboy looked back. There stood Amadu watching from the verandah. Resignedly he returned the bundle and took the cloth in his hand once more. With another master there would have been a chance for an hour or two in the market,

and the hiring of some urchin to get the gum for him. But Balance, curse him, would know to a stride how far off were the trees with gum. Quite cheerfully and at a run he set off.

John Balance waited perhaps five minutes, motionless, apparently idle, in the *rhoorkee* chair. Smoke curled slowly from his pipe under the rim of his helmet. The day was stoking up and already the metal lid of the cigarette box felt unpleasantly hot. But he was unconscious of the heat. With all his mind he was trying to assume the mental outlook of John, Culver's boy, the boy who should have been nearly a hundred miles away from the scene of his master's death, but most suspiciously, hadn't been. He was trying to put himself into the boy's mind, to assume the boy's character and reactions, as after a night with Mariamu he received an unexpected bag of money from another boy; to forget his shoes, leaving them in the road; to forget to go back and pay the money he owed; to glance furtively about and turn hastily down a side street.

Then having assumed the reactions, John Balance tried to work back to the cause. It was a hazy, half subconscious process; a process of feeling rather than reasoning. It was coming . . . coming . . . He felt a glow of anticipated success. He clutched the little cloth of money that John must have clutched, felt surprise, consternation, then dazed furtive fear that drove to flight.

That was it! He was back in the hot morning sunshine again, pipe in mouth, a white man sitting before a table. John knew nothing about the murder till the other boy Saidu told him. Saidu too, must have told him that he was suspected, or the feeling of danger could not have developed so quickly. Saidu too, gave him money. What

was more had come prepared with the money to give him. For he would not normally walk about with the equivalent of a year's wages in his pocket. What was his motive? Where did he get the money? Who for the matter of that, was this Saidu?

Then the gum arrived, and Balance pigeon-holed the problem till later.

The nodules and stalactites of gum were poured out on the table. John Balance sorted out the clearest pieces, licked one or two to make sure they were of the soluble kind and not resins, and with his penknife freed them from fragments of bark.

Next the gum, after preliminary washing in cold water, was shaken up with hot water till it formed a thin solution. A little of this was poured into the quinine bottle, and more hot water added to the remainder.

Now for the test! With Amadu's help John Balance carried the uniform case of papers from the verandah into the hot sunlight. He noticed with approval how still the air was. Cautiously he bent back the creaking lid; the charred papers did not waver.

Dipping the thin grass stem into the gum solution, he blew down the other tube. The result was a fine spray that left a momentary mist hanging in the air. He squatted beside the acrid smelling uniform case, and, leaning almost into it, with exquisite caution began to work.

CHAPTER XVII

THE sun was surprisingly hot for the end of December. The *Harmattan* haze of the last few days had lifted. But John Balance welcomed the blazing heat, uncomfortable though it was, since it made the charred sheets dry more rapidly.

Each sheet of charred paper, he found by experiment, needed two sprayings with the home-made mixture, and the first coat had to dry before the second could be applied. Otherwise the fine-sprayed gum would drip on to the sheets below and bind them into a sticky mass. The second spraying had to dry before the sheet could be lifted out of the box. And even after two treatments with the dope, the charred paper required the most careful handling he could give it and the closest attention.

He lifted a fragile page on two straws, and was transferring it to the table for further treatment when something caught his eye.

"*Sannu da aiki*—Greetings on your work!" Hatasu answered John Balance's puzzled glance.

"Welcome!" The frown left John Balance's face. But he was busy. "Have you eaten?"

Vaguely he heard her reply. Apparently she had. She seemed happy to sit in the sun and watch him. 'Tumbi, he had noticed, was lying against her knees, asleep as usual. What a wonderful watch dog he should be at night since apparently he slept all day.

Having given a first coat to the fresh sheet in the uniform

case, Balance straightened his aching back, and moved to the table to spray the sheets lying there. Each sheet after removal got three further coats to give it additional strength. The lettering still showed in faint contrast, unobscured by the translucent gum, to the black charred background. On one sheet it seemed to make it stand out better.

Reaching for the large bottle of gum solution to refill the spray, he glanced up.

"Behold, these are the burnt papers of Kalava," he explained to his small spectator, "And I seek to make them strong so that I may take them in my hands and read them."

This was an invitation, or Hatasu took it as such. She sprang to her feet, and went quickly up to the table. With a squeaky yawn 'Tumbi followed more leisurely.

"I will not touch, indeed I will not touch." She thrust her hand firmly behind her back, interweaving the fingers the more firmly to resist temptation. As she gazed at the black sheets, her eyes at first wide open with excitement, narrowed slightly in disappointment. "But, these small marks, can those who read, read them?"

John Balance assured her they could.

Hatasu looked doubtfully up at him under her shiny black eyebrows.

"But of course white men's writing is always hard to read, all letters being alike in size," she made allowance, justifying her doubts. Moving back a little from the table she sat down again and began to trace letters in the sandy soil. "Now if it had been written in our writing, I could have read it. '*Bis . . mi . . lla . . hi . .*'" she brushed away 'Tumbi's outstretched paw which was in the way, and continued to scribble with henna-stained forefinger.

John Balance, the tube of the spray in his mouth was too busy to reply. Too busy even to decipher the letters as he preserved them. That could be done later, when there was no sun. It was about midday now, and an averagely dense coating of spray still took two minutes to dry. It had taken longer when the morning was not so hot, and would take longer again when the heat of the day began to wane after three o'clock.

The first sheets had each required up to twenty minutes treatment before they could be moved. Even now, at least five minutes per sheet was the best pace he could make; this included two sprayings, two dryings, and cautious removal. It was the drying that held things up so badly. Once the sheets had been removed to the table there was no delay, since any number of sheets could dry at the same time. But in the uniform case the top sheet only could be dealt with.

Time was of the utmost importance, John Balance cursed himself for not tackling the job the day before, but then there had seemed no hope of salvaging the charred mass. Only that morning, as he shaved, had the idea occurred to him.

"And Mariamu, whom you spoke with, is she not beautiful?" Hatasu had the air of continuing uninterrupted conversation. Writing in the sand had doubtless made little progress, and the white terrier as usual pretended sleep.

"Indeed she is beautiful!" Hatasu replied to herself. She wanted conversation even if she had to do it all alone. "For all men like Mariamu, doubtless owing to her skin that is as smooth and soft as the silk of the kapok tree."

Balance continued to blow through his spray.

"And so it is with Mariamu all over, without scar or blemish, for I have seen her thus when she came to Kalava.

Not even is the skin hardened at her knees with kneeling at the grindstone, for she does not grind corn as do wives who are married." Hatasu broke off to examine her own skinny, little knees.

"But when she used to come to Kalava . . ."

"It is enough." John Balance curtly interrupted further revelations. He didn't give a hoot for Culver's morals or lack of them. But the man might have shown a little decency; hidden matters from this small and rather attractive waif. Yes, rather attractive . . . was Culver planning to . . . sort of getting her used to the idea? Sounded very like it.

A corner cracked off a fragile page. Anger and delicacy of touch do not mingle well.

Hatasu looked in solemn wonder at the puzzling white man, stood up for a moment to re-wrap her little silk skirt-cloth, then, reseated, again changed the subject.

"Last night I thought, and thought yet again, and this morning rose early from the bath-room"

"The bath-room?" John Balance drew his head back from the uniform case and put the spray down. "But I told Amadu to let you have a hut"

"That is true. Moreover I waited in the hut till your light died, not wishing to anger you. Then remembering the man who watched us from the darkness, the man who doubtless carried a knife in his right hand, for in his left he carried the cloth not in his hand, but wrapped round his arm as men do when they use it for a shield . . ." Hatasu was watching John Balance closely as she spoke. The memory of the stealthy intruder evoked no trace of fear either in voice or gesture.

With aching back, and wearied by the heat, John Balance

was trying to combine haste and finicking care; an irritating pair of opposites. With relief he welcomed a growing spot of uncharred paper in the centre of each successive sheet . . . only to find that it made matters more difficult instead of easier. For the heavier centre of unburnt paper increased the strain on the fragile burnt edges when the page was lifted.

Hatasu noted with satisfaction how engrossed he was in his work. The plea of fear she offered would deceive any other white man, but this one, though madder than most, had an aggravating understanding.

"So this morning I moved the lid of the bath from the doorway, where I had balanced it as an alarm in case one sought to enter, I went out, taking 'Tumbi.' The girl stopped, for the white man was looking at her over his big nose.

"You disobeyed in not sleeping in the hut prepared for you." Balance's voice was stern, more stern than he realised. "And now you seek to deceive me. For you slept, not in the bath-room but at the doorway not guarded by the bath lid. For it comes to my mind that in the dust before the door I have seen the print of your mat."

The girl made a sound of assent and choked miserably.

"Not fear for yourself, but fear for me, made you do this. O Hatasu, if I desired a guard, could I not place a *dogari* at each door, and six more hidden in the compound?" It was absurd that this decimal point of a person should constitute herself his protector, subjected herself to such risks. "Is it fitting that a small child, and a fat, white dog should watch over me while I sleep? Though men have tried to knife me, though poisoned arrows have been shot at me, though it is said—but this I do not believe—that poison has

been placed in my food, no knife, no arrow, no poison has reached me. I still live. Since my days are numbered, shall I die before the count of them is ended?"

He stopped. Hatasu's eyes were bravely but miserably fixed upon him. Her thin chest, her little stomach moved to the quick breathing of her distress. John Balance standing awkwardly on one foot, peered down upon her, blinking rapidly like *Shafu*, the hawk, his namesake.

"Dear me, this will never do," he muttered in English. "Dear me!"

He bent down, and with a gummy right hand patted the girl feebly on the bare shoulder, then on the head. His hand stuck to the grey silk kerchief and pulled it off.

Sobbing Hatasu threw herself forward, and buried her face in the fat flank of the surprised terrier. With a creditable effort for one so fat and lazy Tumbi raised a protesting paw and craned his head round in an effort to lick the child's right ear.

"Oh, Balans, never again will I deceive you, for you know all things. And you do not even beat me as Kalava did when I angered him." The words were muffled and indistinct.

"But oh, Balans." Hatasu raised her head. "Does a man of wisdom sleep in an open hut, always in the same manner, in a bed always in the same position, so that one coming with a knife in the dark may find him? Did not Kalava always lock his door? And the Manager sleeps behind doors, and moreover has his white woman to sleep with him in the room; women sleep less soundly than men!"

John Balance transferred his weight to the other foot, and scratched his ear with the gum-spray. He tried to speak.

But Hatasu had more to say.

"Now a thief fears a dog little, for no *musulmi* would have one in his house. He fears a cat more. But above all he fears a sleeping woman, lest he tread on her and fall, and, rising among shouts of alarm, should not know where lies the door by which he entered."

Hatasu raised a tear-stained troubled face, and sat back on her heels. She felt for her head-kerchief, then for lack of it wiped her eyes on her brief skirt. Balance tried to hand back the head-kerchief, but was ignored.

"Now I would have it known in the market-place and throughout the town that I, Hatasu, sleep in your room. Then will any thief or evildoer say to himself, 'Where the white man sleeps we know, for we have seen his bed through the open door. But where this woman—for indeed, indeed, I am nearly a woman—has spread her mat, who shall say?' Also there would be 'Tumbi here, though nothing would wake him.'"

John Balance essayed tact. The sun was low. He set down the gum-spray and looked at the watch on his left wrist.

"Tick! Is it so late? Five o'clock, and I am hungry. Now I will call Amadu, and he will bring biscuits for us to eat. Nice biscuits of the kind we call 'chocolate' such as you ate that night at the house of the Manager. Sweet in the mouth . . ."

Hatasu rose, a quaintly majestic little figure. Gravely she accepted her head-kerchief and knotted it around her head, straightened and re-wrapped her little skirt. John Balance could not read her expression. It couldn't be anger, for what had she to be angry about?

"Come, 'Tumbi!'" She turned from the dog to Balance.

"I do not eat! I go!"

"Allah grant me understanding of women and children before I die! And more immediate comprehension of this small and puzzling mixture." With grave solicitude Balance watched the departure of the little procession; one small girl stiff with injured dignity followed by a sleepily reluctant terrier.

CHAPTER XVIII

PAIGE-THOMAS swung into his hut with careless stride. The trousers of his white linen suit bagged at the knees from the long day in a hot office. Disgustedly he looked at them and the ink-stain on his finger, then consulted his watch.

The hut was mudwalled, but differed from Culver's hut in being square. Differed still more notably in the finish. The mud floor was smooth, black and almost glossy, without the usual "pot hole" where feet and chair legs had broken the surface. A spotless ceiling-cloth, stretched taut, hid the unsightly underside of the grass roof, and trim blue casement curtains framed the small window in the north wall.

Stripping off his coat he flung it carelessly to his servant, turned up the starched cuffs of his shirt, and moved across to the wash-basin in front of the window.

"What news of your wife?" Paige-Thomas' drawl was absent when he spoke Hassau.

"The son is not yet born." The boy continued to fold the coat. "But the woman from the village waits always. To-night we think . . ."

"It is good!" Paige-Thomas took the proffered towel, and mopped carefully round the surgical plaster that hid the dressing on his palms. "And if Allah permits that it be a son, I give a ram for your feast. See too that the best woman attends. I will pay."

With beaming face the servant attempted thanks. Paige-Thomas cut him short.

"No matter. All must be done most fitly in my household, whether in the matter of the polishing of boots or the birth of a child . . ." He broke off. A man's voice, followed by the laughter of girls came faintly through the open door. A frown crossed his face.

"Permit that I go and stop them." Hurriedly the servant went out, closing the door.

Paige-Thomas fingered the scar on his forehead, and looked around the room. Well-polished leather suit-cases, and the more usual steel uniform cases stood in a row against the south wall, supported, as precaution against termites on two horizontal iron rails. The rails in turn stood in metal cups of oil. By the side of the bed, and the inevitable deck chair, colourful native mats had been spread. He examined the cups of oil to see that none had gone dry, then ran his finger along the books on the shelves, in search of dust.

Impatiently he strode across and opened a worn leather gun case. The sight of the pair of costly hammerless ejectors seemed soothing. He took one out and delicately fitted it together. With sympathetic finger he stroked a slight bruise in the dark wood. They stood for something in his past existence; for the country house parties of pre-war England; a life which finished with the lives and fortunes of most of the men.

The well-kept gun came to his shoulder, and swung through an imaginary line of flight. It would throw a better pattern of shot, and had a crisper trigger action than any of the machine made guns used in this country, but its more delicate action made it less suited to the rough con-

ditions. Why bring out hundred guinea paired Jeffereys to West Africa where cheap foreign guns of softer metal would do nearly as well, and probably last longer? It was the same with people. He finished wiping out the oil, and laid the gun carefully on the bed. The country suited clumsy, simple, rebounding-hammer sort of people, made of rather soft metal. They were good enough for it. The hammerless ejector type of man should be capable of better results, but in the long run perhaps proved too delicate, with over complex-workings and was too highly tempered.

But he didn't want to think. He rubbed the weal on his forehead. How long was that boy going to take?

The servant entered hastily. Noting the gun, without pause he laid out breeches, soft grey leggings, and, as was obvious by their age and patches, favourite shooting boots. Paige-Thomas himself selected a pale khaki shirt which would be in keeping with the sun-bleached undergrowth.

The horseboy lifted the saddlery from the rack behind the door and paused for instructions.

"Balkisu, not the roan," the white man ordered, "and tell the horseboy that the *curb*," he gave the English word, "must not be twisted as it was last Sunday."

On his return, the servant lifted down the cartridge bag from its appointed hook, and checked the contents. Then disconnected the cleaning rod his master had used, and put it back in the gun case. Paige-Thomas fastened the second legging and stood up.

"When I am gone, give more water to the flowers on the table, also remove the nest of the spider from the window." He bent his head to pass through the doorway. "I shall not need a hat, for the sun is already low."

Paige-Thomas slid into the saddle, and Balkisu, given her

head, leaped forward in playful pretence of bolting. Hastily the servant handed gun and cartridge case into the horse-boy's hands as the latter started to follow.

From a polite distance a small throng had watched the mounting. Paige-Thomas had a strange hard sympathy with natives of all degrees which evoked in return a puzzled admiration. A one-legged pensioner of the mine hobbled forward on his crutch.

"Why does your master ride a mare, when all other men ride stallions in this country?" he asked the houseboy.

"Allah knows! But doubtless because all others ride stallions," he picked up a saucepan outside the cook's hut. "Thus none can ride with him, and he rides alone."

"But who seeks to ride with him?" The cripple put his head on one side. "The wife of the Manager?"

"Allah alone knows!" The servant filled the saucepan at the water jar and carried it towards the house.

Returning through the dusk, Paige-Thomas drew rein at the rest-house.

"Hulloa! Anyone in?"

John Balance poked his head out of the rest-house just as Amadu appeared and took the horse's head.

"That you, Paige-Thomas?" Balance in a beam of lamplight from inside the hut peered into the dusk. "Come along in. Or rather let's have drinks outside."

The horse was led round to the back, and Paige-Thomas sank into a waiting chair. The D.O. came out with the lamp and set it on the table.

"Let me pour you a drink. Glad to see you here. Too busy with Culver's papers all day to get up to the Mine. How are things going?"

"They're *not* goin'! What with Christmas hangovers,

Culver's death, and everythin' else . . . " Paige-Thomas' voice trailed off and he took up his glass. "Here's luck! I mustn't stay long. Just dropped in on my way from shootin' to give you a couple of bush-fowl. My horseboy has the birds, and will be along in a moment. He wasn't far behind."

"Very kind of you to offer me the birds. But game must be scarce in this kind of country, and since I've just plugged a guinea-fowl myself, I don't think I ought to accept. By the way, I don't expect you'll mind if I clean the weapon while we drink?" John Balance called to Amadu, and the cleaning rod, flannelette, and a thing like a large tube of toothpaste were laid on the table by the lamp.

Paige-Thomas eyed the six-inch celluloid covered cleaning rod. "Pistol?" he queried.

Balance nodded and drew a neat Colt '22 automatic from the right hand pocket of his jodhpurs.

"So easy to slip into your pocket," he explained. "Naturally you miss a lot more than you would with a rifle, and, of course, you can't bag anything on the wing, as you do with a gun. But you can take the pistol along when you couldn't be bothered with gun or rifle"

"May I see?"

John Balance slipped out the magazine, ejected the round that was in the chamber and passed it across by the barrel.

"This afternoon I had to stop working on the papers when the sun got too low. Not enough time before dark for a proper shoot, and also I wanted to see that Culver's grave had been filled in and finished off properly. So I slipped the pistol in my pocket and as it happened found a flock of guinea-fowl. Got my first bird, but missed my second as they got up. Of course . . . " John Balance

added apologetically, "Culver's grave's none of my business. The cemetery belongs to the Mine. But you know the mental attitude a white man develops out here? The interfering ways and snobbish belief in his own superiority that you find in Police Court Missionaries and Parish Visitors at home."

Paige-Thomas had slid back and locked the action of the pistol. Putting his thumb-nail under the breech as reflector, he looked down the barrel.

"Shouldn't call it interferin', Balance. Lovely barrel this, not a spot of wear or pittin'. You and I and the damn' few others of our kind out here have got to see that things are done properly. Done properly, not only by natives but by white men." He spoke absentmindedly, gazing down the barrel at the bright spot of lamplight on his thumb-nail. "Compared with the average run of white men, the native is a decent minded, kindly, patient miracle. What are we? A drunken, sex-famished, irritable, unbalanced bunch of semi-invalids. Blame it on the climate, and the unnatural life, and perhaps you're not far wrong. But those of us who are sane enough to do so, have got to act as keepers to those who can't control themselves. If we are still sane enough to judge . . ."

Paige-Thomas withdrew his eye from the barrel.

"Borein' you with preachin'?"

John Balance was lying back in the long chair. He had filled and lit his ancient cherrywood and seemed at peace with all the world.

"Not a bit! Then you think that . . ."

"Twenty-two, I see. What make ammunition do you use?" Paige-Thomas obviously wanted to change the subject. Balance followed the lead.

"A cheap German brand, half a crown a hundred, not including the iniquitous import dues of five shillings a hundred, naturally!"

"Oh Hell!" John Balance waved his pipe and grinned. "I'm off on a grouse now . . . To get back to your question . . ."

Faint amusement showed for a moment on Paige-Thomas' solemn face. He lit a cigarette and slid the case back into his shirt pocket.

"We're all a bit off balance in this damned climate." Paige-Thomas prepared to elaborate his argument. "My harmless question made you suddenly furious. Out of all proportion to the importance of the import tax. Of course, you pulled yourself up at once, but there are lots of people quite incapable of pullin' themselves up. That's where our responsibility lies."

"I believe I see the point you want to make, but I don't agree altogether." John Balance drew his chair up to the table and started to take the pistol to pieces. "Let's hear your view, and then I'll tell you mine."

"Summin' it up, it's a duty of controllin' the individuals of the herd when they want to get too far from the average behaviour of the herd. The law deals with very rare and very extreme cases, but milder and more common offences, or attempts at offences have to be restrained or punished by public opinion."

Balance nodded. "The law would have to be impossibly elaborate to take over the task of public opinion."

"Exactly. Nobody wants it to, except fanatic reformers. Public opinion is much more flexible and up to date. It applies special rules to special circumstances, to schools, to clubs, to different classes of society, as and where people

feel they're needed. But the effectiveness of public opinion varies with the compactness of the herd."

"Put more simply—we're too scattered out here for public opinion to keep us under decent control? I belch, or beat my servant vindictively, because there's no one of my own kind to see?" The pistol cleaned, Balance sprung it together and prepared to listen more closely.

"Nobody to see, or nobody whose opinion you care a damn for if they did see and disapprove. It works the same way." Paige-Thomas rubbed the scar on his forehead with a finger of his bandaged hand. He had an air of being puzzled, almost surprised at his own vehemence. "So here, on the West Coast of Africa we get sun and climate—both about the worst in the world—playing hell with the white man's character, and, because he's so scattered, about the weakest public opinion to restrain him. Hence the increased responsibility, I suggest, on those with decent self-control to control the rest of us."

"If, as you say, public opinion works so feebly, I don't see how the self-controlled can control the others. The problem hadn't occurred to me, as I so seldom see other white men."

"Stiffen the penalties!" The quiet emphasis in Paige-Thomas' deep voice was impressive. "Reinforce Benner-ton's weak will by a knowledge that he will meet with more than just faint disapproval if he breaks down. Make Winchester positively afraid of giving way to his childish tantrums, whether that fear is fear of ridicule or of answering violence. With Olafson"

"Difficult, though I suppose it can be done." Balance screwed up his lower lids, as a bird does, a hawk for instance. "But is the problem quite as simple as that? If

Bennerton is allowed to bend a little it may save him breaking under the strain—I don't of course know what it is that is shaking him up so, beyond the usual sun-strain, insomnia, fever, lack of women and so on. As to Winchester, probably his damning and blasting releases his anger in harmless words and saves him assaulting aggravating natives. Olafson throws a drunk from time to time, as far as I can discover harms no one by it, but lets off steam. I'm no psychologist, but it seems to me that if you don't allow people the less harmful outlets, they'll bottle up steam till they're dangerous, either to themselves or other people."

"You're thinkin' of the individual. I'm considerin' the general good—the interests of the herd." A trace of irritation showed in Paige-Thomas' rising inflection. "There'd have been less shell-shock during the war if we'd all let ourselves go and run away when we felt scared. There'd be fewer suicides and 'mental' cases out here if white men let go of themselves in the way you suggest they should. I grant you both points. But that's lookin' at both from the viewpoint of the individual. For the general good, what's needed in both cases, war or Tropics, is discipline."

"Discipline, yes, but with outlets." John Balance knocked his pipe out with emphasis. "Concert parties for the troops in rest, an occasional drunk for Olafson when off duty. You probably keep your mental normality by occasionally kicking your boots across the room . . . don't look so shocked, if it isn't that it's some other secret vice you indulge; I've dozens of 'em! I always drink tea in my bath on a hot day, work off bad temper by skipping, eat honey with a spoon because it's too liquid in this hot country to spread thickly enough for my taste. By giving way to myself, by allowing myself outlets I keep normal."

"Normal . . . you! My dear Balance." Paige-Thomas choked with deep satisfying chuckles. "You take tea in your bath, smoke native tobacco, which you keep loose in your trouser pocket, shoot birds with a pistol, are held in a mixture of superstitious fear and affection by the native . . . and call yourself normal! Now I'm bein' offensive . . ."

"Not a bit! Perhaps I am a bit quaint." Balance sounded quite unruffled. "Comes of living alone so much. Your glass is empty by the bye."

"Must go. I can hear Balkisu pawing away impatiently." Paige-Thomas rose to his long lean height. The measured shuffle of a led pony approached through the darkness. "Can we fix up a pistol shoot some day? You must be an expert since you shoot birds with one."

"Glad to." His duties as a host accomplished, Balance seemed impatient of his guest's delay in mounting.

With languid deliberation the tall miner swung himself into the saddle, steadied the lightly-dancing Balkisu, threw back a drawling sentence of thanks.

John Balance, already on his way to the rest-house, called an answering good-night over his shoulder.

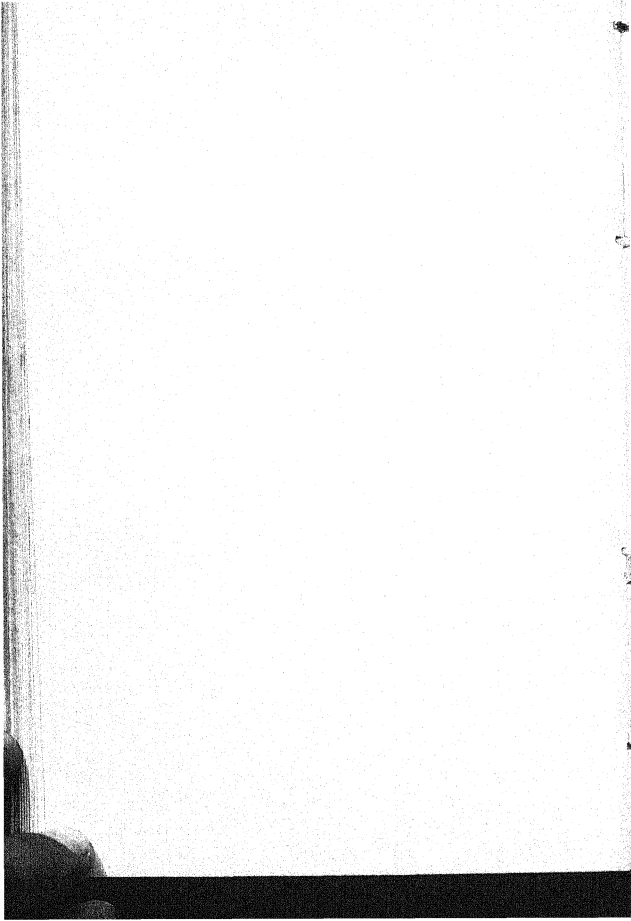
Culver's death—murder, he now felt sure—had been on the night of December 25th. The next day had been spent on such necessary preliminaries as Inquest and Burial. To-day was the twenty-seventh, and still no certain clue had come to hand, not even a slight hint of any motive for killing Culver.

But to-day had been spent restoring the dead man's trunkful of papers. Civilised men live so much in words and on paper, and are so pathetically eager to cheat time by storing records of their past, that Balance felt distinctly hopeful. They might of course be useless, the day's hard

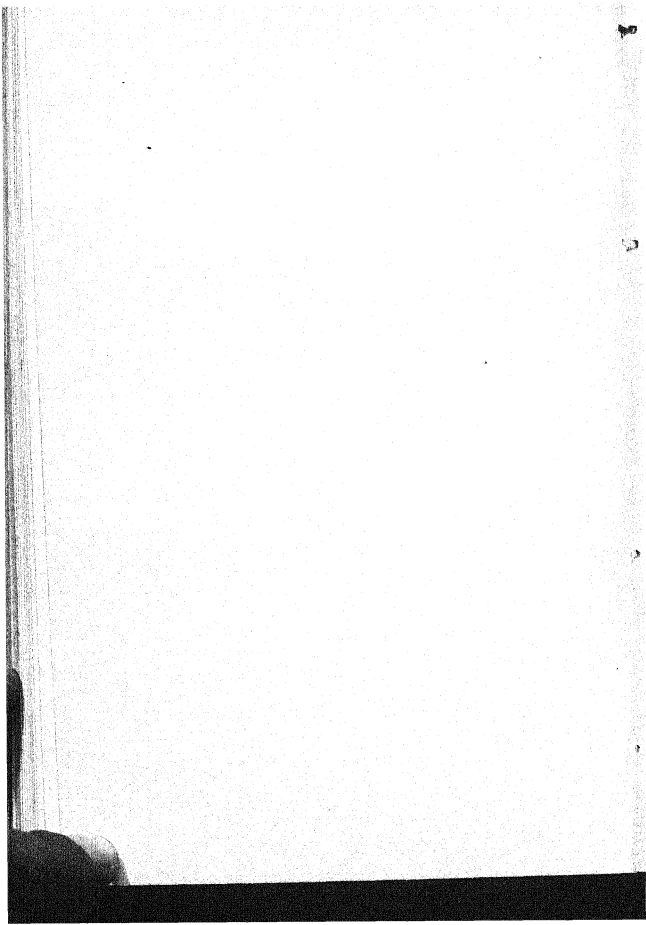
THE MYSTERY OF THE FLAMING HUT

work might turn out to have been mere waste of precious time.

But now that Paige-Thomas had gone, the doubt could be resolved. The papers were there in the trunk, restored, and waiting to be read.



PART IV



CHAPTER XIX

WITH Paige-Thomas' departure the way was at last clear to examine Culver's papers. One might learn nothing from them, or they might hold the key to the whole puzzling murder.

John Balance, returning to the drink table to carry the lamp indoors, met Amadu bearing a message.

"The two *dogaris* have come by your instructions. Also, they bring word from the Chief of the Village asking if you will receive him. They have waited long," Amadu explained, "But ordered that, since you were with another white man, I should not disturb you."

The D.O. set down the lamp and considered. The papers were tantalisingly near. All that was needed was to defer the interview with the *dogaris* and the Village Head. But the examination of the papers would be a long and tedious process; the interviews could be made brief. Better deal with the latter and have the way clear—at last.

"Have word sent to the Village Head, with my salutations, that I will see him in half an hour. In the meantime let the *dogaris* come to me."

As the servant hastened off with the message, the D.O. poured himself a final whiskey. To Mohammedans alcohol of any kind is prohibited. Servants are too closely in contact with white men to be strict in their religious ideas, *dogaris* might be considered not too rigid or fanatic in their views, but on the arrival of the Village Head all drinks would be removed as a matter of course.

Glass in hand John Balance paced up and down, restless and irritable. It was almost exactly forty-eight hours since Culver had died, and the prospect of bringing the murderer to account seemed with each passing hour increasingly remote.

A District Officer has no permanent skilled staff who in his absence can take over an investigation, and John Balance knew that his other varied and urgent duties would prevent his remaining in person to carry on the work.

Evidence, sufficient to support a prosecution, must be found within the next three or four days. Then he would be forced to go forward with his interrupted tour of inspection, and Culver's murderer if still undiscovered, would never be brought to justice. Incidentally—and Balance did not like the prospect—public opinion would complacently decide that Culver had died by an accident, and unhesitatingly condemn the District Officer as a melodramatic idiot for having thought otherwise.

Fretfully he thrust his cherrywood into the left-hand pocket of his jodhpurs and filled it with the coarse native tobacco he carried loose. Smouldering grains of the powdery tobacco spilled down his shirt as he lighted the pipe. He grunted angrily as he brushed them off.

The fiancée too—what was her name? Miss King, wasn't it—was another cause for haste in solving the mystery. She should have received the wire by now, with its carefully guarded information of Culver's death. She ought of course to turn round and take the next boat home like a sensible woman. But if she didn't? . . . There must be no open question of 'Murder, Suicide or Accident?' to meet her on arrival. Her position would be painful enough without that.

A soft annunciatory cough came from the darkness. The

native, from Emir to beggar, places great value upon courtesy. It is felt that to surprise a friend is to place him at a disadvantage. A man's privacy, even the privacy of his thoughts, is not a thing into which one may brusquely intrude.

From the darkness came again the deprecating cough. John Balance removed the footrest from the chair, and sat down.

"*Salaam alaikum!* Greetings to you!" Two men in the red robes and turbans of *dogaris* emerged from the darkness. Behind them a shorter figure in white, carrying a satchel of papers appeared.

"*Alaikum es salamu!*" John Balance returned the greeting. "And the statements?"

"All, with your permission, I have written." The scribe in the white robe swung his satchel of ornamented leather around from beneath his arm. His small delicate hands loosened the intricate fastening of the flap and drew forth some pinned sheets of foolscap. These he proffered to John Balance.

Balance unpinned the sheets and spread them out on the table at his side. Eagerly he glanced through the ornate arabic script.

"Each servant, each horseboy, and all others living in the white men's compounds have been questioned?"

Balance tapping the papers looked up at the scribe.

"All. Each one we questioned separately, so that his friends should not hear his answers." The man in the white robe was obviously pleased with his own cleverness. "And each whom we questioned we kept apart until we had questioned all his friends."

"It is good!" John Balance was already comparing the

statements and numbering them marginally where they supported each other. Occasionally a pencilled query mark suggested a possible discrepancy, or on the other hand suspiciously over-exact corroboration which might have been the result of pre-arrangement.

The scribe watched with quick moving eyes and expressive face as the white man regrouped the papers and pinned them again.

"What each servant did, and where he went between the time of sunset, and the alarm of fire is accounted for," the scribe announced with pride. "Moreover, often I set traps in words but none fell into them."

"Traps of what nature?"

"Questions such as would mislead; such as would make a guilty one think that a friend had lied to help him, and cause him hastily to agree with the lie," the scribe ceased refastening the flap of his satchel to gesture with his delicate hands. "Thus I would ask one, 'Whom did you visit in the village soon after sunset?' and another 'What took you to the house of Such-and-such-a-one, the Headman?' Had the one I questioned killed Kalava the Paymaster, he would not have denied having been elsewhere at the time of the killing, even though it were false. Thus I would have known his guilt. But none fell into the trap."

John Balance nodded his understanding. He had used the method himself. But like most tricks in examining witnesses and suspects it had to be used with caution. True, it would often single out the people who had bad consciences, but those who were particularly scared, even though without good reason, would walk into the trap as well.

"So you think there is neither guilt nor knowledge of guilt among them?" John Balance valued other people's

reactions and judgment as checks upon his own.

"None knew that the allotted days of Kalava were accomplished till the white men themselves ran to the fire." The scribe was deferentially emphatic.

The D.O. leaned back in his chair again. This negative result was a little disappointing. But all police work is that. Most of it is a process of exhaustion. A careful and painstaking search up nine hundred and ninety-nine blind alleys before discovering the thousandth which leads somewhere. Once in a lifetime a brilliant chain of deduction will lead a surprised and incredulous investigator to the solution of a mystery almost as often as inspired intuition will arrange the jig-saw items of evidence into a convincing, self-corroborating story of the crime. In either case the investigator is likely to cut down his smokes and drinks and anxiously consult his doctor.

John Balance sighed forth a cloud of rank tobacco smoke. Just as people hopefully take tickets in the Calcutta Sweep year after year, crime investigators never quite train themselves to relinquish hope of the perfect clue.

The scribe awaiting a favourable comment had withdrawn a few paces.

"*Mallam*, Scribe, yours has been the work of many hours, and much care."

The little man made shy embarrassed sounds in his throat as John Balance spoke. "And Shamaki, your news concerning the matches and cigarette ends?"

Shamaki touched hand to ground in deep, dignified obeisance, then from the front of his gown took little bundles of cigarette ends and of matches and laid them out on the table.

"I have failed! It would be well that I return to my

village with your permission. In this land I have no eyes, no nose, no ears." The *dogari* fumbled in the large pocket which spread across the front of his robe, and began to lay out little bundles on the D.O.'s table. A strange assortment of matches and cigarette ends carefully tied with native thread into little bundles. They were the same cigarette ends and matches which had appeared at the Inquest, but were now further subdivided.

Balance examined the bundles superficially, as Shamaki sought further in his pocket, finally turning it inside out to ensure that nothing was left.

"I have divided these things further, and I think without error. Each is with its kind, but that is all." Shamaki leant on his club-like stick, bowing his head in humiliation. "I have thought, and again thought what may be the meaning of these things, for there *must* be a meaning. If I see a cropped tuft of grass, a chewed twig from which the leaves are gone I say 'this was such and such an animal who passed not later than midday or before dawn' and much more."

This was true. Balance had often been shooting with Shamaki, and had marvelled at his accurate deductions.

"But in these things," the *dogari* lifted one hand from his stick and made a slight gesture towards the miscellany on the table, "I can find nothing, no meaning. You have shown me which are the cigarettes of the Manager, those large, and covered as if in brown paper." Balance smiled at this description of Winchester's costly cheroots. "You have shown me the cigarettes and matches which each white man smokes, even the ashes from your pipe which lay beside the chair in which you sat, but even so, I cannot tell the meaning, do not know the day or the hour or the

happening which they show. All is hidden. I am blind."

Only a day or two ago the D.O. had been amused at the pride that Shamaki the ex-hunter had shown in his new robe, his new and well salaried appointment. Now he seemed almost close to tears. John Balance feigned great interest in the classification of the oddments.

"There is no blame!" The D.O. reassured him. "Is it not of value to be able to say 'Here is no track of the game I seek?' Then we may seek the tracks elsewhere. Is not your work as good as that of the *Mallam*, the Scribe, for by it we may say, 'Here we can find no trace of the murderer' and so we may go on and examine further ground?" Shamaki's face brightened.

"The Village Chief is here!" Amadu advanced from the darkness with the news.

The two *dogaris* and the scribe politely withdrew, as Balance rose from his chair.

CHAPTER XX

THE swish of bare feet on the sandy ground drew nearer. Sandals had doubtless been left at the entrance to the compound. A short, stocky figure, voluminously robed, and in large, white turban, halted, stooped, and placed hand to ground in salutation. Beyond the circle of lamplight vaguely seen white robes and turbans sunk groundwards as the foremost figure, the village chief, murmured salutations.

Shamaki and Sulai Yola had reappeared and now in deep tones answered the salutations. It was unfitting in native ceremonial that John Balance, District Officer, answer on his own behalf. At a sign from the white man his servant brought a mat and made as if to spread it for the Chief. The Chief as if shocked motioned for the mat to be removed, and, as Balance sat down, disposed himself on the warm, dry ground.

An amusing byplay, since, from the smallest chief to the noblest Emir, tradition assigns a certain kind of seat according to circumstances. In sitting on the ground, the Village Head was being rigidly correct. In offering him the mat, John Balance was paying him a compliment upon the ancient lineage of the Mafun Chieftainship which went back almost as far as that of the Emir himself.

Behind the Chief his followers settled themselves, their feet courteously hidden beneath their robes, dark faces alert

with interest. Several small children, one completely naked, added themselves in companionable native fashion to the group.

More salutations of less formal character followed; enquiries as to Balance's health, the fatigue of travel. In turn Balance sought news of the Chief, his health, the health of his people, and the success of last year's crops.

"All is well, but for that matter upon which I bring you condolence." The Chief paused, whilst his followers in the background made faint, clucking sounds of sympathy. "Never before has a white man been killed in our land, and we are greatly troubled."

John Balance looked at the speaker's pock-marked face with interest. Thirty years ago, at the coming of the white man, this leader had been a famed warrior and raider. Now he was grizzled, and his snub-nosed genial face belied his reputation. Balance himself, with his beaky nose and sharpcut face, more closely resembled the fierce-eyed raider of the imagination. Difficult to imagine the cheery old man as the cruel devastator of countrysides. But his cheery look was absent as he spoke of Culver's death. Balance noted that he used the word 'killing' and not a more general term such as 'death!'

"I thank you for the condolence of you and of your town," John Balance inclined his head in grave acknowledgment at the Chief's words and the deep murmur of the people that had echoed his expression of sympathy, "But greater than our sorrow is the shame that we feel, you and I, that this *murder* should occur in the land whose peace we guard!"

This time it was the Chief who bowed his head in acknowledgment. The Chief had used the word *killing*.

John Balance had tried the word *murder* and watched for the effect. There was no sign of surprise. Obviously native opinion was unanimous in accepting this interpretation of the facts, though the white men at the Mine had doubted. He wondered if some facts hidden from the white men were common knowledge among the natives. Such often happened in less grave matters.

"To me also it is clear that Culver, the white man, was killed, but who was the killer?" The D.O. put the point directly to the old warrior Chief.

"Of that we have thought, also of how the killing was done, and also of why. For in these days no man kills without strong reason. All yesterday, and much of to-day I have sat in council calling upon one man and another to unravel these riddles. I have sought help, for it is not a matter in which I am skilled."

John Balance could picture the scene. The large, many arched audience chamber, the old warrior sitting on a sheep-skin distributing occasional *kola* nuts to his courtiers, whilst seemingly endless opinions and redundant hearsay evidence were offered and absorbed by the amazingly retentive native memories. An occasional sheep too would wander in and out through the open doors without interrupting the proceedings or detracting from the dignity of the council.

"And what did you learn, oh Chief of Mafun?" John Balance enquired.

"As to the way of killing, nothing is known among our people. Though your two *dogaris* whom you brought with you do not think the killing was done with the knife, and still less with sword cuts that bleed greatly. Poison perhaps, or, in some white man's manner such as by shooting. But only the *dogaris*, among those I questioned had seen the

body, and they say it was greatly eaten by the fire."

"That is true. Little could be learned from the body. A skilled doctor of the white men might have opened it and looked at the heart, lungs and other matters and learnt much. But none of us have the skill, and moreover the body is now buried. And the killer? Who is he?"

Scarcely a fair question, Balance realised, as he put it. But the old Chief re-arranged his robe and tried his best to answer.

"No thief did the killing, or it would have been by knife or sword. Nor would anyone of our Hassau race kill by any other means, unless perhaps a spear." The old man drove an emphatic, stubby forefinger into the sand before him. "Other kinds of men, *kafi* . . .," he broke off confused, remembering that the word *kafiri*, infidel, would be discourteous to use before a white man. ". . . Other men, not of this country, would kill by poison or shooting, men such as *shakiri*, natives of the south. Since the Paymaster was killed, one such man must have done it."

"Men of the south such as come with the white men to work for hire, servants, mine-workers, and clerks?"

"Even such." The Chief made a mark in the sand to denote this class of suspect, the *shakiri* or down-country native.

"What of white men? They too can kill?"

A murmur of polite dissent, somewhat horrified dissent, rose from the half circle of natives.

"Of them also have I thought." The blunt, old warrior saw no reason for pretence. "Doubtless among their medicines the white men have knowledge of swift poisons, shooting is to them no stranger than a sword to us, and moreover they were near the death and the burning. But I

have considered further . . . ,” proudly, “. . . and why should they kill? For are not all white men rich? Therefore they would not kill to rob. And for hate and enmity they would not kill, for they are as brothers, not hiding their women from each other, but eating and laughing with them. Doubtless too, as a troop of comrades riding into a strange country, they are as though pledged to each other.”

John Balance wondered what the old man would think of the bitter jealousy and unreasoning hysterical hate that sun and climate seemed to breed among white people in this land. Interesting the deduction made from the freedom of white women when judged by native standards. A well bred Mohammedan woman would of course see little of men other than close blood relations.

“Now if white men would have no reason to kill this one who was killed, and if *Musulmi*—Mohammedans—would kill in a different manner, then neither of these did the killing.” The Village Head was reasoning carefully. Balance listened with increasing interest. “Of the *shakiri*, who has had most reason, greatest opportunity to kill, and moreover has run away in fear? The servant whose name . . . tck! I am old and forget . . . ,” he turned to his courtiers to supply the missing name, “John, yes, he who is called John.”

“Opportunity to kill he had, but the reason, the desire to kill?” The D.O. sought to elicit any grounds for suspicion that the Chief might know. On the other hand there was the fact that John had not fled immediately after the murder, in fact seemed not to have heard of it till the morning after, when the strange boy met him and gave him the money.

The Chief looked around before replying, and hesitated.

He said something over his shoulder that Balance could not catch, and his followers rose and melted into the darkness. John Balance made a sign to Shamaki to see that no one was in the rest-house near at hand.

CHAPTER XXI

THE Village Head drew a little closer and lowered his voice. "There are matters that need not be hidden from you, but which it is needless to recount before the people. The dead man was not as other white men are to their households. Therein lies shame, such as, but for the killing, I would not mention to you."

"Speak freely, for the shame lies in the wrongdoing, not in the recounting." John Balance sucked uncomfortably at his pipe. Where white men are few each feels acutely responsible for his neighbour, the actions of any one man affecting the good name of the others.

The Village Head fidgeted with his hands. Bred in the old traditions of courtesy and pride he sought for words which might give the facts without embarrassment to the white man. "The white man who died, whom they called the Paymaster, was not as other white men. So all said." The warrior raised his eyes and stopped fidgeting.

John Balance concealed a smile at the well-intentioned words. "You spoke of him and of John his servant," he sought to get directly to the facts. "He beat him too much, or worse, without good reason?"

"He beat his servant not as an *ubangiji* the lord of the household should, but till to the master's shame other servants and white men intervened. Thus also he beat the small girl whose name . . . whose name . . ."

"Hatasu?"

"Hatasu or some such name. Also the dog of a breed

such as white men keep, beating them foolishly and without reason, it is said, doubtless because of the drink which the Prophet in his wisdom forbade." The broad face showed disgust. "But not for such small matters is a man killed."

Men of certain tribes, John Balance knew, would commit suicide or attempt murder if beaten, but not so a down-country boy such as John. The murder, too, had all the marks of premeditation, and for that reason presupposed a stronger, more lasting hatred.

"The dead one offended even more deeply then?" The Chief had stopped and needed aid in his telling.

"There is a horse in every stable, a man in every village who is *wofi*, worthless, bad! Of such sort was the dead one. Allah have mercy upon him!" As an obvious afterthought the old man added the conventional phrase.

The Chief hesitated and was silent. The interview was as distasteful to him as to the white man. Each had unconsciously avoided the other's glance; yet the facts had to be known to John Balance if he were to understand the conditions under which the murder had taken place.

"Oh white man, when I was young I was a soldier, and never have I been a courtier. But for a generation and more I have served the white man. Pardon, therefore, if I tell of things without skill," the old man struck palm against palm with the gesture of one who has emptied his hands—emptied his hands perhaps of attempted tact. Solemnly, almost with anger he faced the other. "This white man sought women. In this there is no harm. But this white man did not seek women as man seeks woman, but as dog seeks bitch, always, everywhere. From the women of the market place, public women, even to those of my own household. Girls not yet formed he sought to buy with the sweetmeats that they

themselves sold, so that, since his coming, they go no longer to do their small trades at the Mine . . . ”

“ And John? ” Balance brought the old countryman back to the point from which his anger had diverted him.

“ He took John’s wife. Then, when John discovered and in his anger drove her out, the white man bought her no house, no food. ”

The old man, no courtier as he admitted, turned his head to one side and spat his disgust. Then, remembering where he was, threw sand over the expression of his extreme distaste.

But John Balance had been watching with unseeing eyes. These unpleasant revelations had been entirely unexpected. Yet they fitted in with indications too vague to be put in words. Culver, of course, he had only met briefly at the drink party, and in the dusk. But at the Inquest, and in talk with the Europeans of the Mine, there had been discreet silences, tactful reservations. “ *De mortuis nil nisi bonum* ”—mustn’t speak ill of the dead—Curse suburban good taste which suppressed such important indications of possible motives!

For the general character of Culver was of the utmost importance. It meant—oh hell!—that almost anyone might have had a motive for killing Culver, anyone with a wife, or daughter, or mistress.

“ This, then, is the reason why John killed his *ubangiji*, the master of the household, and then fled. ”

“ But John spent last night in the village, and appeared openly this morning, sitting outside the house of Mariamu, ” John Balance demurred to the acceptance of John’s guilt. “ This morning another boy met him with news which made him show great fear. That news therefore was fresh

to him and perhaps it was of the death of his master. What other news would cause him to fear? Only then he fled. Therefore I think, that of the many men who may have desired to kill the white man, he alone appears so far guiltless."

"*Asho!*" The Village Head voiced his surprise. "That much is known?"

"Is known with some certainty. So now we must seek news concerning not John, but all those who had reason to desire the death of that white man—all saving John!"

"*Kai!* The lone tree becomes a forest!"

"But the trees of a forest may be counted singly and in groups. Thus . . ." John Balance stopped to sort his facts. He knocked out his pipe, refilled it from his pocket and lit it over the lamp before he spoke again. The Chief re-settled his cramped limbs. The ceremonial manner of sitting is hard on stiff, old joints.

"All men must be suspect, even to you and me. Even women perhaps! But those who could most easily have done the killing are white men and *shakiri*, natives of the south—as you have shown."

The Chief murmured assent, leaning forward intently.

"Of all men, those who were nearest, and could most easily draw near to the white man without question or suspicion, are the white men and their servants. This you said but now. Of these, among the servants all seem equal in guilt or innocence except John. All have been questioned save John, and in no case has guilt been shown to be probable."

Balance was watching the Chief's face. Perhaps the old man was reluctant to abandon his belief in John's guilt, but he showed only a keen interest.

"Of the white men also it is true that all seem equally guilty or guiltless," John Balance continued. "Of one man alone little is known, him whom we call Olafson, whom you call *Maigemu*, the Bearded One . . ."

"Oho! *Maigemu*, whom the labourers call *Baba*, Father!" The Chief struck hand to thigh. He seemed much amused. "Always when a labourer does aught to anger him, he speaks of killing, but always he spares the man, saying that, alas upon that day, he is too busy to kill! Then will he give the man sweetmeats such as children eat, and which he carries in his pocket. And, though grown men, the labourers eat without shame since it is *Baba*, Father, who has given them."

Maigemu was clearly a character well known to the native when other white men with less striking ways went unnoticed. The beard would help in this of course.

"But on the day of the killing he was drunk," John Balance urged. "And when drunk the nature of man changes . . ."

"*Ya bugu sarai!* He was indeed drunk!" The Chief almost laughed at some recollection. "In the evening he came to a small village north of here and stood in the village square, pointing to the sun in anger and ordering that it should be made to wait, since the day was a good one and should be prolonged. People came and comforted him, saying that they would send at once a swift runner to me that I might know his desire. Then his servant, who is a pagan of the hills, and whom he saved once from drowning, found by some means a *tulu* of beer though the villagers are all *Musulmi* to whom such drink is forbidden."

"With the coming of the beer the sun was sinking. But *Maigemu* had already begun to tell the stories such as it is

his habit to tell. Tales of giants and people, and animals that speak as men, and all in a country white with cold. So that quickly the people gathered. With a calabash ladle the Bearded One dipped out the beer even as he told his tales. Shortly he would have stood up, but fell on his side and was silent. Then his servant rolled him upon a mat and lit a fire upon the ground, as is always his way, it is said, when this happens to his master. Then the boy called to some friends, and they finished the beer and waited by the fire till dawn."

John Balance smiled at the picture. Once more he realised how impossible it was to foretell the native's reactions to any given conditions. Their religious convictions against strong drink, as well as their sense of the decorous should have been offended by Olafson's exploit. But both the villagers and this old Chief had seemed to enjoy it.

"This news of the Bearded One is certain?" Balance returned to a consideration of the important point, Olaf Olafson's alibi.

"The whole village saw, and their elders recounted all to me next morning."

John Balance considered, then summed up the result of the interview.

"The search for the guilty one in our minds, Chief of Mafun, is this then: John who you considered surely guilty is more surely guiltless. The Bearded One, whom the white men suspected is, above all white men, guiltless. Thus are two of the trees in the forest of men of which you spoke, examined and passed by. This much we have done."

"Now that John no longer stands before my eyes I see more clearly. Fool that I am, knowing only war and farm-

ing!" With a movement of impatience the Chief flung his head back, and the end of his turban-cloth shook loose. "There is another upon whom guilt may lie—a dangerous man, going by night, doubtless armed, and calling himself a trader, yet who is no trader!"

John Balance guessed what was coming, and unconsciously put up a smoke-screen from his pipe.

"Mariamu, a woman of the town of whom you spoke but now, came breathless to me at midnight telling of a robber who planned to steal from you and perhaps kill. A *shakiri*, she said, by his speech, which she had heard behind the fence of her house, as he plotted with his friends. But she did not see him. Therefore I sent *dogaris* at once to watch your house, but from a distance so that you might not be disturbed. They heard and saw nothing, though they waited till you stirred in the morning. So I doubted the word of the woman, who was moreover, but a *karua*—a woman of the market-place. But to none of the *dogaris* did I give the reason for my order, for the woman feared the anger of the robber and begged that I should tell no one."

John Balance was mildly flattered. Mariamu's fears had led her to try to prevent the robbery of the District Officer by the supposed thief. But it must have been a different feeling that led her to suppress any description which might aid in his arrest.

"It is well to tell none, for the vengeance of such night wanderers is well known, and women such as Mariamu, husbandless, kinless, unprotected," John Balance sought a means of taking the old Chief off this false trail without revealing his impersonation. Then an idea occurred to him. "But perhaps in her story is some slight truth, only mis-

understood as she listened. Earlier in the evening, a stranger came lurking in the darkness. There he stood," Balance pointed, "whilst I sat as I now sit. When I rose and pursued he fled. He wears perhaps a white *riga*, and brown cotton trousers such as clerks and servants of the white men do. But then he had the *riga* rolled up and in his hand."

"*Yowwa!* All are as Allah created them, and this worthless woman spoke truth as far as she was able! I will say no word of Mariamu, but only of that which you tell me. This I will tell to the *dogaris* whom I shall place hidden outside your compound to guard you."

John Balance cursed inwardly. He had methods of his own for coping with evilly disposed trespassers, and wanted to be free to wander at night without having his movements known and discussed in the village.

"A guard would increase my risk, not now, but later." Balance's excuse had the merit of half truth. "Always has my house or my tent stood open for anyone to enter. So that many people say it is a trap that I set, for otherwise I should have a watchman, a dog as do other white men, or at least closed doors. In this lies my safety, for evil-doers fear to enter. Though it is true that certain men have entered and been caught."

Doubtfully the Chief assented. People would blame him if anything happened to his District Officer, and it was much simpler to place a guard than run a risk. But John Balance rose to terminate the interview.

When the Chief and his followers had been swallowed by the darkness, Balance called for his servant and entered the hut with the lamp. All day, first for one cause and then another, he had been forced to suppress his eagerness to

examine the papers left by Culver.

In the papers, if anywhere, must be the main clue to the murder, of that he had gradually convinced himself. Dinner would be eaten as he worked. Quickly he slipped into pyjamas, mosquito boots and dressing gown. The servant replaced whiskey and sparklet on the table, and at a sign brought up the trunk of papers.

The trunk gave a crack like a pistol shot as John Balance opened it. He stood for a moment as he was, bent double, thinking. The crack had brought back the picture of Winchester lying about the revolver ammunition. What did it now mean in the light of this new evidence of Culver's character? "Any man with a wife . . .," he had told the Chief. "Any woman . . ." and Mrs. Winchester had the weakest alibi of all

With shaking hands John Balance took out the first papers.

CHAPTER XXII

THE rest-house still sweltered with the day's heat, increased still further by the burning lamp. Sweat formed on John Balance's thin, dark face, dampened his hands. He mopped his neck and arms with a towel. Paper after paper, preserved but still fragile, was lifted from the trunk and arranged in reverse order on the table. The number seemed unending, and, careful as he was, fragments of burnt edges coated with gum stuck to his sweating fingers and broke away.

With an exasperated "Damn!" he turned from the work long enough to pull off his dressing gown and pyjama jacket. Bare to the waist, sweat still trickling down his chest, he returned to the work.

Amadu was softly clicking the plates on the verandah, to remind his master of the long overdue dinner. But without result. Patiently, deftly, Balance transferred sheet after sheet, reversing their order. The examination must start with the earlier papers first, and these were most probably at the bottom of the box.

With a grunt of satisfaction Balance passed the last of the gum-sprayed sheets, and reached those less damaged, needing less care in handling. Then came a find that might prove valuable; the photograph of a girl, a little more than a snapshot, but apparently professional work, for it bore the name and address of a firm of photographers stamped across the corner. Chelmsford was the address. Chelmsford was in Essex, wasn't it? The address was the

same as that stamped on the empty folder found outside Culver's hut. That practically proved that the empty folder had been Culver's; made it probable that the girl was Miss King. Balance tossed the photo to one side to await its turn, and continued the sorting.

A polite cough sounded from the verandah. Amadu had returned from gossip at the kitchen hut, and again wished to suggest dinner. John Balance turned a grimy hand to consult his wrist-watch. Past midnight already.

"*Sai gobe, till to-morrow!*"

At his master's good-night Amadu appeared and hesitated at the door. But the white man's attention was again on his strange task, and it was inadvisable to mention dinner. Amadu returned the good-night and the white man nodded absent-mindedly.

As soon as the servant was safely out of the way John Balance's actions became more puzzling. He stepped out into the section of the verandah used as pantry and began softly to tap odd tins, bending his head to listen to their notes. An empty four gallon kerosene tin was his first choice. Then he selected two different sized biscuit boxes and emptied their contents on to a table napkin. Their notes when emptied seemed to satisfy him, and he brought all three into the room. His office-box furnished a reel of fine black thread. With these oddments hugged to his bare chest he stepped out of the rest-house into the darkness, and was gone several minutes. He returned empty handed. Lifting the mosquito net he felt under the pillow and drew out a neat Colt twenty-two automatic, verified that the magazine was loaded, and flicked a round into the chamber before replacing it.

Then followed more hours of patient effort. The oil

lamp was screened to light only the paper under examination. Each sheet had to be glanced over, and, where it appeared promising, its whole contents had to be deciphered, sometimes with much careful adjustment under the light that the faintly different tones of writing and typing on the brown-black background might emerge. Where the paper had been more burnt than toasted it gave a lighter greyish contrast to the writing, making decipherment more rapid.

At long intervals John Balance would give a grunt of satisfaction, and his typewriter, balanced on two boxes in the darkness to his left, would click while he took a copy.

By good fortune he was reading, not typing when a faint 'clong' sounded from somewhere on the outskirts of the compound. At once his lamp was out, and he was at the rest-house door listening, trying with still dazzled eyes to pierce the darkness.

He had begun to make out the skyline, when cautious steps swished, ever so faintly, in the sands a few yards away. The camp bed gave a creak as he slipped back from the doorway and slid into it. With wide flung legs he sprawled across the bed, uncovered, breathing heavily in the dark, as men strive restlessly for sleep through the tropical night. Detail must be correct in case the visitor had a light. But he slid one hand beneath the pillow.

The man outside seemed to be reconnoitring, or had stopped to gather courage. The straw roofing over the doorway rustled as the man's head brushed against the overhanging edge in entering. Then a faintly glowing light appeared from something the man carried. It reminded John Balance of the 'thieves torch'—a smouldering stick of tinder-like palm fibre—but that it gave no odour. The light was just sufficient to show up objects within a couple

of feet of the intruder, but would not waken a light sleeper or give a beam of light that could be seen from outside the hut. Certainly it was not a match. John Balance had an unusually complete knowledge of native practices, good and bad, but mostly bad. The light being inexplicable worried him more than the ominous visit which he seemed to have suspected. The glow came towards him in the bed, and he closed his eyes to a narrow eyelash-covered slit. Not even the faintest outline of the intruder showed behind the glow.

Then the light swung off again, and showed the typewriter, a few inches at a time. John Balance could see it travel from left to right and left to right again over the typing-paper. His right hand came silently from beneath the pillow. The glowing reddish spot approached the table and the papers.

The crack was deafening in that small room. The glow vanished. Several gasping breaths, as the man sought for one of the two doors, and then a thud as his foot missed the verandah steps.

Calmly Balance slid his feet out of bed. "If I hadn't guessed what your light was, you'd have had a bullet in your thigh, my lad." Smugly, almost, he addressed the absent man. "It's a good safe place to wing a man unless you hit the artery." He groped for the matches on the table, and lit the lamp.

"It's one thing to shoot the pips out of cards, but not so easy to lie on your back and shoot through a mosquito net, with only a vague blur where your sights ought to be . . ." Balance was searching his untidy floor as he talked. . . . "Hope to God I didn't miss. Ah! Here you are!" He stooped over a box against the wall and picked up a small electric torch. He examined it under the lamp. The glass

had been drilled from one side by the small bullet, but still bore what appeared to be a disc or red handkerchief gummed to it. A simple but effective dimming device.

"I knew you were an amateur, my lad, when you bumped your head coming in. You read English—if you can call that disgusting love-letter I was typing English—for your light carefully followed line after line from left to right. You were only interested in Culver's papers. So you're mixed up with the murder. I wish, though, I could have given you longer to look round just to make sure, but I was too certain you were here to take or destroy the papers. You're wearing tennis shoes of course. This will be your own torch. You never expected I'd be waiting for you and that you would lose it, so you didn't take the precaution of bringing someone else's torch."

John Balance laid the wrecked torch beside the photo.

"Only white men use electric torches, and they use them for finding their way home from friends' houses after dark. Consequently several white men will have seen you with it, and will be able to identify it. Of course you'll be surprised to find it missing, and will say it must have been stolen." John Balance's face, the lower half that was in the lamp-light, displayed a tight-lipped menacing smile.

"No more visitors to-night, I think! No need to re-set the burglar alarm." He turned down the oil lamp a little, and drew his chair up to the table. "Now for a little quiet work till dawn."

The feel of dawn was in the air, even penetrating the lamp-lit, stuffy rest-house when John Balance straightened his neck and back and stood up to stretch. Wearily, with disgust, he looked down upon his night's work. Did all women write such letters? And were all men so mean—

or foolish—as to keep them? It seemed so.

He remembered the first time he had been ordered to sort out a brother officer's estate. In addition to similar letters the man had kept what appeared to be a detailed register of names and addresses and intimate physical details of all the women he had known. John Balance had been new to the country then, but he still remembered the feeling of mental nausea, remembered going back to his bungalow that day after the office had closed and destroying his own papers, even to receipted bills.

He better understood the causes now, and could almost sympathise. Loneliness, ill-health, and sleeplessness constantly undermined a man's belief in himself; the day by day, and worse—the night by night attrition of the Tropics. The man's need, pathetic and desperate, to preserve some record of his past successes. The rabid pathological sex-hunger of the Tropics making some tawdry affairs with a greengrocer's daughter more valued to the man's unbalanced mind than a hard earned rugby blue or proud war record.

The District Officer kicked back his chair and went to the door. The flat, colourless tones of dawn were already marking the outlines of objects without picking out details. Trees, even the rest-house behind him, loomed tall and mysterious.

He knew his reputation among natives and white men, and was secretly proud of it. But as he stood there, the dawn breeze ruffling through the hair on his bare, white chest, he felt small and helpless. Dawn was like a re-birth or plenary absolution of everything and everybody, imposed upon them without their willing or seeking it.

His spare, hard-worn body in faded green pyjama-shorts—shorts black on each thigh where he had wiped gum and

charred paper from his hands—appeared ludicrously inconsequent. His dark, hawk-like face, weary, seamed with earlier hardships, had the sadness of a visionary that dreamed for a while between one hard reality and the next.

Light grew stronger. Details of the view obtruded themselves like hard realities upon the vague half imaginary outlines. "It's not proved. It's not proved," John Balance asserted, pled. "Anyone else may have killed Culver . . . Mrs. Winchester, for instance . . ."

With the hardening light Balance's expression too seemed to harden.

"What the hell does anything matter? Anything!" His voice was more matter of fact. "There's only one punishment for premeditated murder, and if the hangman knows his job, it doesn't take long once it starts!"

CHAPTER XXIII

WITH a grim line to his mouth John Balance re-entered the hut. After the freshness of the dawn outside, the lamp-lit room was depressing in its untidiness, its reek of stale tobacco. His glance noted the items with distaste. The hole in the mosquito net made by the bullet, the intentionally rumpled bed, the matches and loose pile of tobacco on a box to the right of the table, the bigger pile of ash, and used matches on the floor where he had tapped out many pipes. The charred, distorted papers on the table still had a stale, burned odour. Only the small pile of typescript by the side of the battered Remington looked at all respectable, and even that, he noted was smudged with black fingermarks. He looked at his hands for the first time, and frowned. But washing could wait. He put on his pyjama jacket, extinguished the lamp, and went out.

Along one side of the rest-house compound was the row of servants' huts, cook-house hut, and rainy season stables. The other three sides were open. At one corner John Balance picked up the cotton reel, and began to wind up the thin, black thread that he had stretched knee-high above the low side-wall. It was still taut and unbroken to the next corner. There it ran up over a smooth twig of a tree, and held a stone dangling over an empty biscuit tin.

For the moment he did not want to think, and the rhythm of the slow and tedious winding was soothing. The second alarm thread was also in position and intact. But the third thread, along the side fronting the road had

been broken. The light was now strong enough to show it lying in coils where it had sprung back. A loop at the further end had prevented it being dragged whilst permitting the stone to drop when the breakage released the tension. The tin bore the dent the stone made when it fell and sounded the alarm.

Leaning well forward that he might not leave footprints, John Balance drew the broken ends of the thread together, noted the spot where the break had occurred and examined the ground beneath. The sun was just rising, and the oblique rays, faint as they were, threw the slightest depressions in the ground into well-shaded relief. There were many footprints and some hoof-marks. But one set of footprints, blurred and enlarged by the looseness of the sand, lay directly under the break in the thread.

John Balance waited only to trace the steps back and forwards a few yards to make sure that they obliterated other tracks with which they coincided, then called his servant.

Amadu appeared, sleepy and blanket wrapped, but unsurprised and unquestioning.

"See these tracks that I now ring with my finger . . ."

John Balance drew wide circles in the sand round each footprint. Amadu watched impassively, and took occasion to scratch his back under the blanket. Formal manners could attend more formal dress.

"Call Shamaki and bid him follow back the tracks till he finds the marks that are most clear, showing the foot-gear worn. Give him a calabash, a gourd of the shape and size of a handbasin, or lacking that a basin or bucket. With it he must cover the clear track and wait till I come." Balance straightened up, but Amadu appeared to linger.

"Is it understood? Good! Then go swiftly, so that Shamaki may follow the track before other feet sweep it."

Amadu shedding his blanket, went off at a run. His master watched him out of sight, then turned back to the rest-house.

Nothing could be done till Shamaki appeared. Even then John Balance knew there was no way in which he could help. Good trackers must not be hustled, must be left to cast forward and back, interpret and deduce, free from the distracting presence and obliterating feet of a white man. And Shamaki at work was as temperamental and nervous as an operatic star.

The hut was still associated with the all night reading of those letters, and seemed squalid. There was time for a short, refreshing walk. No need to change yet, as no one would be stirring for another hour. The D.O. took down his long barrelled Luger pistol that hung from a cow-horn hook on the wall. The pyjamas had no pocket for the little Colt, but the Luger, too heavy, with its holster, to be worn on a belt, was made to be slung from the shoulder.

The air was fresh and cool beyond the stubble field of guinea-corn, even chilly in the low-lying ground by the stream-bed. His heelless, native slippers clop-clopped sandal-fashion as he strode along.

The cloud of weariness and depression lifted from him as he walked. For years John Balance had developed the habit of taking his worries out shooting, losing them in the bush. He did it consciously now, much as other men drowned loneliness in whiskey, turned on the gramophone, or plunged themselves into back-slapping social hilarity. Shooting was better than all these. It called for concentration of sight, hearing and mind that allowed no rival pre-

occupation. It was the only waking moment, except when eating, in which he did not smoke.

There were some guinea-fowl scratchings on a patch of farm-land, and a dusting hole or two such as domestic hens make, but these were probably done yesterday. The birds would return, almost certainly, but later in the day. At the moment the flock was likely to be in the thick thorn scrub into which he could not penetrate with bare legs.

He drew the long barrelled pistol from its combined stock and holster. It could be used as a rifle when fixed to the end of the holster, but he preferred to use it without. His thumb pushed back the safety catch and his forefinger lay along the trigger guard. Its perfect fit and balance gave it a snug feeling in the hand as he held it in readiness. He gripped the loose slippers with his toes that they might not slap.

Sounds behind him caught his attention, and he would have turned, but something moved in a clump of grass fifteen yards ahead. As he checked his stride, a rabbit bolted from its hiding place. In one smooth sweep the pistol swung into the line of sight, and trigger finger took the pressure. With the roar of the powerful ammunition, dust kicked up harmlessly above the animal. With added haste the rabbit bounded out of sight.

John Balance turned sharply to the sound of running native feet behind him.

"What has afflicted you, that you . . . ?" Then his anger faded as fat, white terrier and small native girl flung themselves gaspingly forward in the finish of a hotly contested race.

"The fat one cannot run!" Hatasu pulled up with a final frog-like leap. "See how he gasps, that 'Tumbi! Had

the race been longer I should have won easily." Her gaudy, silken head-kerchief waved in her hand, and her awning striped skirt-cloth had become little more than a symbol of propriety. Maitumbi circled hopefully, then panting came to rest, with lolling tongue. Hatasu's thin chest and rounded childish stomach rose and fell almost as fast as the terrier's quick breathing.

"*Madalla!* Well run!" John Balance was no longer angry. But a stern note in his voice caught Hatasu's attention. "Oh Hatasu, I am not your father or your master, but there is a matter that must be settled between us." John Balance scratched the back of his ear with the foresight of his pistol. "Yesterday I said that you should sleep in a hut in my compound, as indeed I said the day before. But on one night you slept or kept watch in my hut, and last night slept I know not where! This is not as I ordered. And if you do not do as I order, how can we work together in this search for him who killed Kalava?"

Hatasu, her skirt-cloth back in place and head-kerchief once more neatly folded round her close, plaited hair, looked with grave criticism at the white man.

Balance could not read her thoughts, but realised that the child's re-arrangement of her dress had thrown into strong contrast his own pyjamas, smeared with gum and charcoal. Her assumption of grown-up gravity suggested that she felt somehow the tactical superiority of the dressed over the undressed, had in it in fact a touch of condescension.

Worn-out by unceasing work, anxiety, and little sleep, the white man had no time for subtlety or tact. He came direct to the point.

"If you would work with me, you must obey me as a

child its father, until the matter of the killing is finished and I go my way. If you cannot promise, there is no harm, only . . . you cannot help me, nor shall I need your help."

As he finished John Balance wished he had thrown into the proposed bargain some incentive, some persuasion. But that would have seemed unfair; and one must be scrupulously fair with this strange child.

Seriously they studied each other. Maitumbi stopped panting and swallowed. Then Hatasu appeared to find what she sought and nodded gravely.

"*Na yarda* . . . I agree." She patted her head-dress and pulled the white fox-terrier to her as though including him within the compact.

"It is good. Since the sun is getting higher we will go back to the rest-house, and on the way I will tell you concerning Saidu, whose doings follow those of John whom you saw at the house of Mariamu. But wait . . .," Balance broke off.

A flock of guinea-fowl planed slowly down from higher ground, landing on the field in front of the party of three. With a whisper to Hatasu to hold the dog, Balance strode quietly forward, pistol in hand. A loud crack, and the flock rose again in flustered flight. Before the racing terrier and girl could reach it, the speckled grey bird was dead. Hatasu lifted it high overhead to save it from the excited leapings of Maitumbi.

They bagged two more birds before the re-telling of the story was complete, and they were within sight of the rest-house before the whole was told to Hatasu's satisfaction.

"John matters little, since he did not know of the killing till next morning. Such is my belief." John Balance slid

the pistol back into its holster. "But if Saidu came simply as a friend of his and to warn him that he would be suspected, and to aid him with money to flee, whence did he get so much money? It was more money than a servant, or any but a chief, native trader or white man would have in his house. Moreover Saidu did not steal it, for no one has complained of robbery."

Hatasu, laden with the three guinea-fowl had been walking behind on the single-file track. Balance expected a comment from her, but none came.

"If Saidu was a friend of John's, then you, who knew John well in the household of Kalava will doubtless know Saidu. For this reason I have told none concerning this Saidu, but waited to ask you. Who then, is this Saidu? Whence could he have got so much money?"

"Good morning, Mr. Balance!"

"Hell! . . . er . . . Lovely morning isn't it, Mrs. Winchester? Out for a ride?" Startled Balance looked around, then recovered himself. Too near the rest camp to do any more shooting; unconsciously he had concentrated on the problem of Saidu, and passed over unnoticed the faint hoof-beats of Mrs. Winchester's approaching pony.

"So you're not sleep-walking! I'm so glad!" Mrs. Winchester looked down with an amused smile at the District Officer's grimed and scanty pyjamas. "When I came up with you, I thought you were talking in your sleep too. I'm sure it was something about this awful death of Mr. Culver, now wasn't it?"

"Yes." Balance felt foolish and ingenuous. He glanced at the trim figure on the white arab-like pony that paced beside him, her spotless cream coloured kit was in devastating contrast to his own soiled pyjamas, native slippers

and huge pistol. The woman's neat, brown shoes and the yellow *numnah* of the pony emphasised the smartness of the uniform cream and white. And the woman was being . . . what was the old-fashioned term? . . . arch. Leaning down towards him confidentially, dropping her voice to the purring note that he had almost forgotten. Where, by the way, was Hatasu? She and the dog had disappeared.

"I rode this way in the hope that you were up and could spare me a moment. I want your help. You're the only person that can help me."

Balance's reply was little better than a grunt. His annoyance was growing, but the rest-house and bath and change of clothes lay close head.

"I suppose by now you know who the murderer is?" Mrs. Winchester drew up the pony at the entrance to the rest-house compound. The District Officer too stood waiting, blocking as if accidentally the entrance. Neither spoke. Patiently Mrs. Winchester waited. Sweetly she smiled.

"Yes," John Balance spoke slowly. His face grave. "Yes, I know who killed Culver. Come in, won't you?"

CHAPTER XXIV

AMADU hurried out of the rest-house with two chairs, and placed them in front of the house where the long shadow of a tree still stretched across the compound.

Mrs. Winchester dismounted, and passing the reins over her arm lay comfortably back in the chair. Amadu would have taken the pony to a picketing peg, but she motioned him away.

Balance considered a moment, then also sat down. If he had a hurried bath and change it could scarcely be considered impolite. But then Mrs. Winchester might stay longer. Whereas if he waited in his present clothes she would feel forced to leave soon, and he could then find out what success Shamaki had had in following the trail. He decided to wait, but told Amadu to bring his dressing-gown.

Openly he studied his unwelcome caller. There was nothing in her appearance to make her unwelcome. Her soft silk shirt open negligently at the neck was more defining perhaps than she realised, the close-fitting cream jodhpurs emphasised the straight slenderness of her legs as she stretched them comfortably on the footrest of the chair. Her hair, as she removed her white helmet and hung it on the back of the chair, lay in rich, glistening coils. Only the greyness at the temples, and the lines on the face, products in part of tropical worry and ill-health, denied her place in the athletic, early twenties.

But why, if she had come to ask him questions, didn't she get on with it? Did she think he enjoyed holding a *tête-a-tête* in a draggled pair of pyjamas?

Amadu appeared and deposited a table. Appeared again with drinks, whiskey, gin, brandy and liqueurs, murmuring that beer was waiting in the cooler. With no precedent of early morning callers to guide him, the boy had been equal to the situation and with a little in hand.

Balance and Mrs. Winchester remained serious, though with obvious difficulty, till the servant had gone. Then the twinkle in her grey eyes spread. Her mouth twitched, and she gave a little gurgle. "A mixed beer and liqueur?" Gravely the D.O. made the offer. Her right hand rose in horrified protest, and she laughed outright.

"If I can't offer you a drink or any other form of hospitality," the District Officer was serious again, "Would you tell me what I can do for you? I gather it is something connected with the murder . . . ?"

"I intended to meet you apparently accidentally, and then get you to blurt out some of the secrets about this murder of poor Mr. Culver. There! That is being frank, isn't it?"

Rather a skilful move, John Balance reflected, to make a frank confession of what was already obvious, and ask credit for it.

"Just out of curiosity?" A nice frank question in return.

"No—o—o." Mrs. Winchester looked older again. "I want to know when the strain of this dreadful suspicion is going to be lifted. Up at the Mine everyone seems to suspect everyone else, and everyone is beginning to think he must be the murderer, and to slink about avoiding everyone else. Why! I think even my husband is suspected, and I know I am."

The District Officer moved uneasily in his chair. The picture might be exaggerated, probably was . . . people

don't 'slink about' when they think they're suspected, but either behave naturally, or overact and give an impression of bravado. But the general air of suspicion was probably true enough. He remembered it was already beginning when the white men left the Inquest.

"Of course . . . You won't mind my saying it? . . . People will naturally suspect Mr. Winchester and yourself . . ."

"But why should they? You say you know who the real murderer is . . ." She beat the arm of her chair with clenched hand, and the startled pony threw up his head. "Why don't you catch him, arrest him, and end all this?"

"It is easy to know that the mouse ate the cheese; it's not so easy to catch him."

"You mean that he's run away? Then it is John, or perhaps John and Hatasu who killed poor Mr. Culver! Both have run away, so it must be them. You speak of the difficulty of catching the murderer, and all the white people are there within reach. Surely your first duty is towards the people of your own race, to free them from this ghastly suspicion by arresting the natives who are guilty. Yet you stay here in the rest-house, doing nothing . . . nothing!"

So sudden was her outburst of anger that Balance wondered whether it was real. A moment ago she had been smilingly reasonable. Now her pretty hands were clenched, and her grey eyes challenging, accusatory.

"Unfortunately both John and Hatasu have solid alibis covering the time of the murder. Hatasu's could be sworn to by a score or more of people who danced or watched the *gatan mata*. John's alibi is slighter, but borne out by his latest behaviour before he bolted." Balance watched the effect of his words. Anger was leaving the white woman's

face, giving place to an expression which he could not analyse. "No, they are not the murderers!"

"Then who? Mr. Olafson threatened Mr. Culver's life on the very day of the murder. My husband told me so himself."

"Olafson with the beard? He was dead drunk at the time, and some distance away from the scene of the murder . . ."

The District Officer looked around enquiringly.

Amadu had returned on silent feet and stood waiting.

"What news?" John Balance asked in Hausa.

"The small boy, whom I sent with Shamaki, returns with a message that the trail is followed to a door, and that Shamaki has turned back to preserve the footmark that is most clear."

"Good!"

"And I have set the small boy to sweep down the nests of the *zirna*ko, the wasps, that hang from the ceiling of the rest-house. So that thus he will see no one to whom he may tell the news till you have leisure."

With a word of praise for his forethought, Amadu was permitted to retire. John Balance turned again to his unwelcome guest.

"No! These three, Olafson, John and Hatasu are certainly innocent. The search has had to go further. Which accounts for the slowness for which you blame me." John Balance was trying to be patient. "But even now I am only waiting till you ride back to breakfast to change my clothes and get on with the work."

"But who else could be guilty?"

"Who else? Why any of us!" The District Officer's patience was ended. "I will answer one more question,

then I must go. I'll answer any question except as to the name of the actual murderer."

The District Officer had let her expend her preliminary enquiries until he felt her approach her main point. To prevent her cloaking this main point with other matter, he had limited her to one question, and knew what this question would be.

Angry as he was, Balance felt regret at the trap he had laid with such seeming ingenuousness. What justified the procedure in his eyes was the fact that Mrs. Winchester still held information urgently needed in the enquiry. There was no doubt that she had been aware of more than she had admitted at the inquest. Why had she called 'Save him' when according to the rest of her statement she had not been in a position to know that Culver was in peril?

With murmured apologies he entered the hut and returned with pipe and matches, also his jodhpurs whose pocket did duty as tobacco pouch.

Mrs. Winchester made no move, might have been relaxed and resting. At the splutter of the match, the pony threw up his head impatiently. The tug at the reins showed Mrs. Winchester's arm already tense and rigid under the mental strain. Balance took pity on her.

"May I help? I'm afraid I've put you in a brute of a quandary. You don't know which of two questions to ask."

"A brilliant guess! Since you are smoking may I have a cigarette?"

With apologies Balance called Amadu and obtained an unopened packet belonging to the horseboy.

"I can save you the trouble of asking the wrong one, if I tell you there is no suggestion that you committed the murder."

"But how could my husband be suspected?"

"Exactly! That was the other question, wasn't it? Also the only important one. For you naturally know that you were not guilty, but do not know what Mr. Winchester may have done. The thought has been torturing you day and night; filling you with bitter regrets for what was after all only harmless folly on your part, though it may have led to such serious consequences . . . "

"Oh! Stop! Stop!"

" . . . And this anxiety increased till you couldn't bear the doubt . . . till, either thinking me a fool, or careless of the suspicion you would cast upon your husband, you decided to come to me and find out what you could?"

"Nonsense!" The word was a challenge, but her voice was shaking. "Completely absurd! On what grounds could my husband be suspected? May I have another match, I've jabbed my cigarette out in annoyance!"

The District Officer passed across the matches, too strange to civilised ways to think of striking one. He felt in his pyjama pocket and pulled out a folded sheet of white paper.

"The case against Mr. Winchester looks alarmingly complete, even to me; and I expect there is a lot that you know and I don't. Let's take the evidence separately under the heads of Opportunity, Circumstantial Evidence, and Motive." John Balance closed his eyes, and the paper that he had unfolded fluttered down between the two chairs.

"The first point really means little by itself. The Manager being nearest to Culver had the best chance to slip across unknown to his servants and commit the crime. Other white men, having further to go from their houses would take longer, and run greater risk of being missed by their boys.

"The circumstantial evidence of his having committed the crime is equally weak. It consists mainly in his admitting the ownership of the ammunition found discharged in Culver's pistol, and in telling a not very credible story as to how it came to be there.

"The motive added to the opportunity and the apparent means of . . . "

"Ahooh!" A shuddering exclamation came from Mrs. Winchester. Balance opened his eyes. The paper was in her hands. Furiously she tore it across and across, then thrust the fragments into her pocket.

"Yes, the letter of which that was a copy shows that your husband may have had considerable motive. I thought it would convince you better than anything I could say, so I brought it from the rest-house when I fetched my pipe. In that letter . . . It was that letter wasn't it? . . . you call Mr. Culver, 'Jimmy my love, my love!' You reproach him for being about to marry and for giving up your combined plans for a 'golden, glorious future' . . . I can't remember much of it, but it is all very impassioned, incautious. And you sign yourself . . . "

Quickly the District Officer caught the reins before the pony had time to trot off home to food and stable. He led the bored animal back and restored the reins to Mrs. Winchester's outstretched hand, trying not to see the tears that had gathered in her eyes. Openly she sobbed, but underlying the sorrow, if such it was, Balance caught an expression of active bitter hatred. Hatred of him, of Culver, or of her husband?

"I think I understand. No doubt Mr. Culver's boy John gave you these letters of mine. And in return for his help in getting evidence against a white man—an innocent white

man—you will shield him."

There was no doubt now whom she disliked so bitterly. Balance found time to be glad. It seemed to him a healthier thing that he should be the object of her detestation than Winchester her husband, or Culver who had attracted her.

"But this is what one would expect from a man who uses his official power to torture a woman like this!"

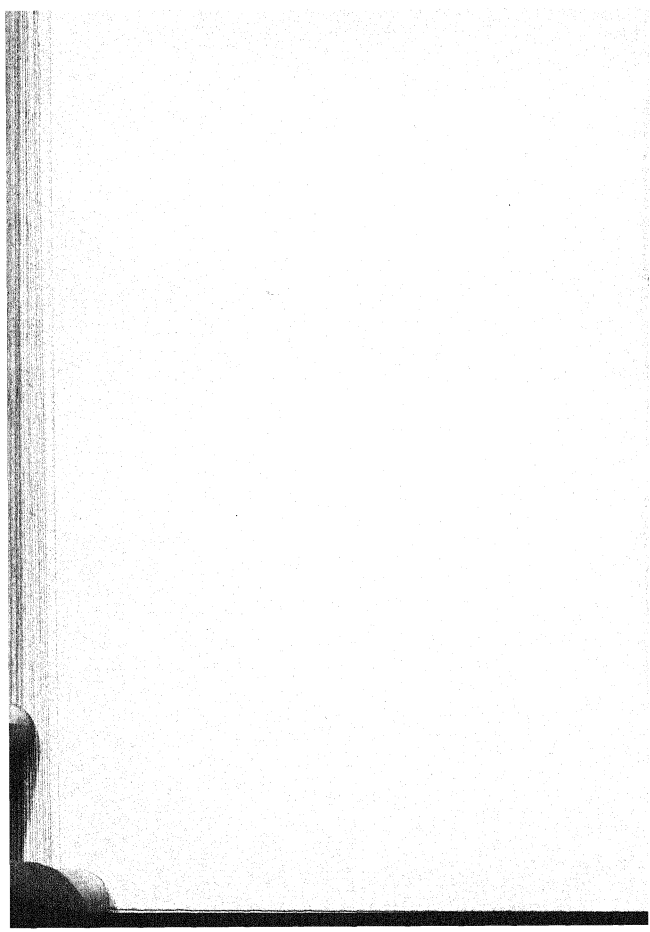
John Balance felt the accusation to be unjust. It was she who had sought the interview. She was free to go at any time. In fact he wished she would. Women, white women in particular, were strange to him, and he feared them. Patiently he waited for the storm to pass.

"So you think your three pieces of evidence are enough to prove that a better man than you is a murderer?" She was sneering now the D.O. noticed. With a man, that would mean that anger was passing away and the man was collecting his wits, trying to plan.

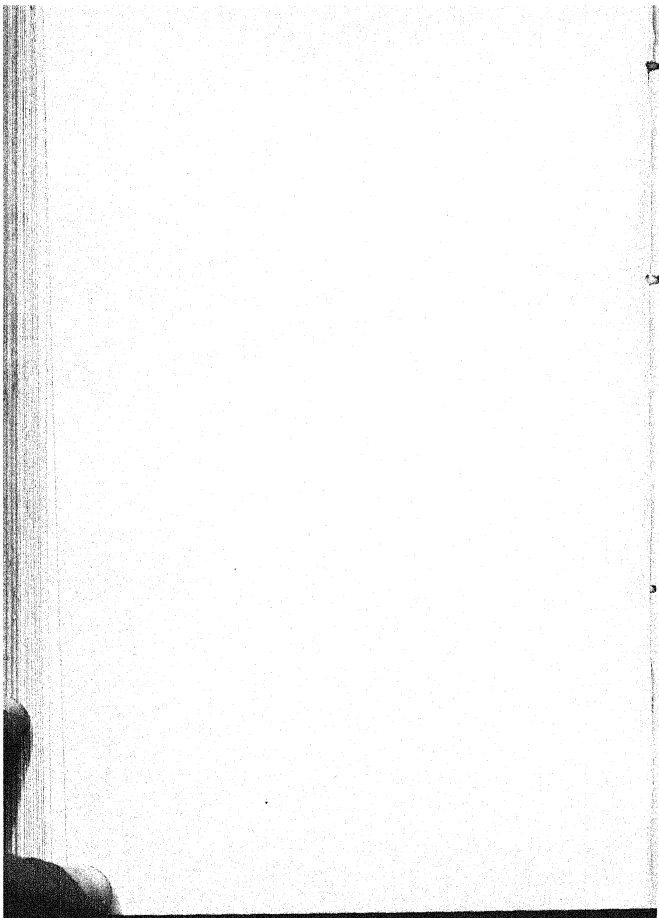
"No finer man exists, his men worship him. It is only because you are a stranger and wrapped up in your wretched natives that you cannot understand . . . that you even suspect him."

"Yet you yourself suspect him."

"No!" Mrs. Winchester was on her feet, dramatic. "How could I suspect him, since it was I who killed Jimmy! I myself, who stand before you now, I killed him! Now will you understand?"



PART V



CHAPTER XXV

JOHN Balance gathered his bath robe about him, and stood politely waiting for her to sit down again.

"Why do you tell me this?" His voice was dispassionate, almost bored.

"Fool! Fool! Just because I made an idiot of myself over Jimmy . . . and bitterly regretted it! . . . Must you think that he could mean to me what George, my own husband, does? That the two men can be compared? That you or anyone else is fit even to understand Ethelred George Winchester? . . ."

"I understand." Balance's tone was less provocative even a little sympathetic.

"You gave three reasons why my husband seemed to have killed Jimmy. Think of them again now that I have told you who really caused his death. It was you, I have heard, who rode up the drive as I walked down. How many minutes passed before I came back to call for help? At the inquest you knew by a slip I made that I had been at least in sight of the hut and was trying to conceal it."

"Opportunity!" John Balance turned down one finger. "With reservations the point is granted. One such reservation is doubt if the fire would have been so advanced when we reached it. Had you only then killed Culver and set fire to his hut, I believe the fire must have started at least five minutes earlier.

"The next point against George was that the ammunition was his. You won't believe me, but I made Jimmy take that ammunition. I told my husband about it and he

was annoyed as he always was when I did any little thing to make Jimmy's difficult life a little easier. You won't understand . . . no one but another woman could . . ."

"Understand? No, but I believe your story as far as it relates to the ammunition. It was you, I expect, who first mentioned the value of the wedding presents as a reason for the need of the ammunition? Quite! I don't think a man would have thought of that. Your husband's story was an unconvincing effort—ask anyone who was at the inquest." Rather pleased, he turned down another finger, "Circumstantial Evidence—Means of causing death. Now as to motive?"

They stood strangely confronting each other. The woman adducing reasons to prove her guilt, the District Officer weighing them, querying them like counsel for the defence.

"Motive? What made me want to kill him?" She swallowed with obvious effort, and hesitated.

Balance swung a tassel of his bath-robe to pass the time.

"You like your evidence in nice little separate bundles each with a label, don't you? Well, the first label is 'Jealousy.' Have you ever in your simplicity heard that a woman can be jealous, bitterly jealous, that her love can turn to hate, and . . ."

"Yes, there is a Latin tag I learnt at school. I've forgotten it now but . . ."

"Latin tags! Of course you don't understand. I hated Jimmy. And then there were the letters like this one," she touched the fragments in her pocket. "And perhaps you *do* know what blackmail is? He threatened to send the letters to my husband."

"Any evidence? Cheques payable to him, money you can trace, threatening letters?" Balance's third finger

poised, ready to record admission or rejection of the third point in her self-prosecution.

"No, I took the money out of the amounts I had with me, housekeeping money and so on."

"I expect you keep a housekeeping account book. Is there any sign of increased expenditure?" He waited, his finger wagging irresolutely. "None? . . . I'm sorry, but you haven't proved motive." He sounded like an examiner regretfully turning down a candidate. Then, as if, against his better judgment, offering a last chance . . .

"How did you kill him?"

"With his own revolver. It was terrible. You see he had shown me how to fire it when it was empty, in the earlier days when we were friends. He said it was absurd that my husband would not let me touch firearms. Jimmy thought that white women in the Colonies should be taught how to protect themselves. I don't know how I fired it, or where the bullet struck. I dropped it and ran . . ."

Mrs. Winchester stopped, her mouth inelegantly wide. John Balance was gazing at her with open admiration.

"Amazing! Half your facts are wrong, and I happen to know you didn't commit the crime But God! What a story you tell! You've taken away any suspicion I might have had as to your having been an accomplice either of your husband or anyone else. What is more important still you've accounted better than anyone else for the ammunition. Now may I go and dress?" He held out his hand in farewell and called to Amadu to prepare the bath.

Mrs. Winchester's slight form sagged. She made a gesture of finality.

"It does not matter," her voice was a whisper of fatigue

and desperation. "I *can* make you believe, you and others."

"Don't you see . . ." Balance pressed his fingertips upon the table till the tips went white, pressed as though striving to press a point home. "Don't you see that if in the face of facts you will try to convince people that you are guilty, they will only think you are shaken by the climate and the strain—in other words 'unhinged' mentally, or else that you have some special object. Those that think you are mentally unbalanced will try to have you sent home. To the other people your attempt will appear a confession that you know your husband is a murderer, know yourself to be the cause of the murder, and wish to make this most dramatic amends—though of course no white woman would be hanged in this country . . ."

"You are wrong. There is a way that would convince. My death. A little poison, and a written confession left behind. It will be so easy, so easy." Her whispering voice strengthened, a look of peace, almost of fanatic happiness spread across her face as though her final solution brought relief.

The D.O. looked at his pistol. That was out of reach. Anyway she would have to write the confession first. That would take time. He could send a hurried message to Winchester, or ride up as he was, as soon as Mrs. Winchester was out of sight—that would be safer. Surely Winchester could stop her folly. If not, well, she would have to be watched, certified by a doctor for the time being. Once the murderer was arrested she would drop her plan.

She smiled triumphantly at the anxious D.O. "You have no way of stopping me."

Amadu announced that the bath was ready, and stood waiting.

John Balance held the pony's head while his visitor mounted. She considered him, as he stood holding the bridle, then looked at the servant.

"Does your boy speak English and understand it?"

"Quite well," in surprise Balance answered.

"Listen!" She turned to the boy, her voice firm and clear. "I killed the Paymaster. *I did. I killed him.*"

Balance caught the boy's expression of startled amazement, then felt himself thrown heavily on his shoulder.

With a stab of her heels in the pony's flank, Mrs. Winchester had brushed him aside, leaped the low wall and was away, galloping hard for open country.

Dazed the D.O. picked himself up. No writing materials, no poisons lay in that direction, in the open bush.

Suddenly he understood. She had confessed before a witness . . . Amadu in fact . . . and . . .

"Bring Alhassan! Quick!" He grabbed up his pistol and ran to meet the horse.

For Goshin Dutsi lay ahead of her. Goshin Dutsi with its precipice that might have been planned expressly for suicide.

CHAPTER XXVI

WITH dressing-gown and native slippers flapping as he ran Balance raced round to the picketing peg.

The bit was already in Alhassan's mouth as the D.O. reached him. The horseboy slid the bridle over the ears, threw back the single rein.

John Balance swung on to the horse's back as the picket shackle-rope was loosed. Amadu, saddle on head, ran up too late. The horseboy jumped to one side. Alhassan, excited by this human haste, leaped with a scattering of gravel, straight into a gallop.

Mrs. Winchester was out of sight, but he swung the eager pony in the direction of her flight. He felt the pony stretch rather than leap over the low compound wall, and they were in a field of *dawa* stubble.

With futile curses upon the caltrop-like *dawa* roots he collected Alhassan to a cautious canter. His lamed horse at the beginning of the race would mean the triumph of Mrs. Winchester's plans, her body mangled upon the rocks below Goshin Dutsi.

Breaking his stride a little, Alhassan picked his neat-footed way between the obstacles, came out at the opposite side of the cultivation, but only to break into a similar field.

Balance cursed anew with helpless frenzy.

He had wanted Mrs. Winchester's explanation about the

ammunition, which he was sure Winchester had not supplied. Still more had he needed her unconscious proof that she knew nothing of how the murder had been carried out, the disproof of any complicity. Knowing less of white women than of poisoned arrows or even the intricate rites of cannibalism, he had failed to guess her reactions in time.

The heavy pistol flogged his hip-bone as Alhassan jerked and plunged his uneven way between the six-inch spikes of *dawa* stumps. He gripped the pistol holster between elbow and side.

The depth of the woman's love for her husband despite her unpleasant infatuation with the disgusting Culver . . . that was the feeling he had underestimated. He knew it now.

The wrath of helplessness grew upon him, of impotent anxiety. She would be somewhere ahead of him, down in the hollow, full of a happy glow of dramatic self-sacrifice, while he was doing his best to lame a perfectly good pony who was innocent of the murky business.

Alhassan, now out on a clear native track, stretched to a free gallop of his own accord. The path was brick-hard and uneven, but that was nothing to the hardy, native pony.

Alhassan bent sharply first to one side then to the other following the acutely twisting track. Balance almost welcomed the thorny branches that drew short jagged cuts across his bare legs. A far-stretching bough swiped him in the face just missing his right eye. He felt his sight dim and mopped at the trickle of blood with his arm.

As his eyes cleared again, they were on a downward slope. Mrs. Winchester he expected, hoped, would be somewhere in the flat bottom. But the white spot of pony and rider was already well up the opposite side.

With a curse he let Alhassan thunder recklessly down the slope. Mrs. Winchester must have been careless of risk to her mount to have made such progress, and no sane riding would overtake her.

He dare not spare his mount, but must save him any avoidable risk. The rider's line of sight was higher, and his reason could occasionally anticipate the possible obstacles. With eyes and mind he strained to analyse the lie of the country, the chance of rocks and gullies hidden round bends. With such acute twists, obstacles were underfoot, then past, almost before they could be anticipated.

With no warning but the slope of the ground they were upon a dried up stream-bed. A damaged foot-bridge stood in their path. It would never stand their downward-plunging weight.

By some incredible trick they were in the stream-bed, Alhassan skating and dancing miraculously over the rounded boulders. With a wrench that nearly snapped Balance's back they were up on the further bank, and on the track again.

Again the D.O. found time to look at his quarry. Almost hidden by the convexity of the rise, she was lost to sight as he looked. No chance to see if her pony was flagging.

Slower the pace now, the surging sweep up the rise, but Alhassan's hindquarters driving like pistons. Though short and spare, and riding bareback, the man realised, with dread, that he was pounds heavier than his quarry . . . and in this rough going an ounce would count as a pound of ordinary handicap. Bareback too, was harder on the horse. One heelless shoe fell off. He kicked off the other. Not that it weighed much; rather because one shoe alone was useless.

Alhassan's pace began to slacken. But the top of the rise was near. They were up. The woman and her white pony were in sight again. Balance was sure he had gained a little. Surely the white pony was nearer, more distinct. He could see the rider look back from time to time, and wondered what her thoughts were.

It was more open country now, and flat. They seemed to be following half path, half game-track. There were fewer shrubby trees, more grass. Less risk to Alhassan, except from ant-holes.

How far off was Goshin Dutsi now? Could he catch the woman in time? The distance between them, thanks to gallant little Alhassan, was visibly less! If only he knew the length of the race he could back up the pony's courage by human calculation of pace. Mrs. Winchester might be keeping something in hand for a long race, while he was blindly letting his own mount play himself out. Hellish thought!

Alhassan was going better again. But surely the pace couldn't last. The white pony ahead stumbled. A good sign! He might be tiring. Surely his rider would be? That was a point that should weigh if the race were long. Mrs. Winchester couldn't be as hard, as work-toughened, as he was, and a tired rider is like a loaded pack-saddle to a tiring horse.

Mrs. Winchester turned sharp to the left, calling for instant decision on the part of the pursuer. To follow her course, make a short cut as though to intercept her?

Balance swung to the left off the track, risking there being some barrier that Mrs. Winchester had knowingly skirted. Pity for his plucky little mount dictated the decision. It might save Alhassan a few yards at least of the

cruelly long lead. Fifty yards, a hundred yards. A few bushes to be dodged, and an ant-hill or two, but excellent going. Then a long line of impenetrable thorn stretching across the path. Alhassan saw and hesitated, slowed up as if to think.

But the decision lay with Balance. To the right would bring them back to the track again. But with—God!—a loss of how many precious seconds! He swung left along the barrier. Parallel with the course which Mrs. Winchester now followed. Gaining nothing, losing nothing for the moment. But if there proved to be no way through the barrier after all, and he still had to retrace his route to the path . . . then . . .

But the thorn-brake was thinning. The bushes became fewer and more stunted. Through the branches he could see the white pony and its rider in brief glimpses. With a yell he found an opening, turned Alhassan almost on his haunches, feeling himself lashed, torn, stabbed, almost dragged from the saddle by the finger-long thorns. He heard the ancient dressing-gown tear in a dozen places, felt thorns plunge deep in his flesh and snap off. Other thorns slashed side-ways and slid off his head or bare legs. The crook of his right arm protected his face. Alhassan was faring better—must be, or he wouldn't have faced it. Thicker skin gave him protection and the older branches, armed with the stiffer, longer spines just missed his head.

Incredibly they were through the horror, and out in open country again, woman and white pony a few hundred yards in front. John Balance neither saw nor knew. The searing pain of the thorns that sought to flay him had been bad enough, but worse still was the mental horror to which they had unlocked the door. Once again he felt himself shot

through and through, lying out helplessly caught in the wire before the German trenches, like a fly in a spider-web of steel barbs and entangled strands.

He pulled himself up from the black hell of groans—his own groans—mud, stench, and high explosive. Found himself swaying, yellow daylight, Alhassan at a slow canter.

Balance spat the blood from his lips, mopped it from his eyes, glared through the bright sunlight, searching for the white pony and rider. They were gone!

Almost he reined up. But caught a moving object out of the tail of his eye. They were to his right, not two hundred yards away, riding level with him.

How they came to be there didn't interest him, if only the bottomless horror of returned shell-shock would hold off. He swung a little right to edge in on them. Vaguely he remembered that he had to catch them, stop them. If not, something or other was going to happen—unless that too was part of the nightmare.

But a sheer drop into a river-bed stood in the way. Al Hassan swerved violently left. Well if the pony wanted to go that way it didn't matter. Might just as well follow the near bank as the others—the white pony and Mrs. Something-or-Other were following the opposite bank. Mrs. Something-or-Other, and she mustn't reach Goshin Dutsi. Why not? Seemed funny. And he, John Balance, couldn't reach Mrs. Something-or-Other to stop her. Funnier still, that! But true. Look at the banks, fifteen feet high each side, and rising—unless the river-bed was falling. Much the same thing though.

Why was Alhassan standing still? God . . . the little swine! But he wasn't, he was moving all the time trying to gallop, exhausted, neck outstretched, poor little fellow!

Still some way ahead, and on that other bank, rose a gradual hill, its side over the stream-bed one vertical sheet of granite.

That was Goshin Dutsi!

With a supreme effort John Balance cleared his mind. Mrs. Winchester was flogging her floundering pony twenty yards away on the opposite bank. Slightly more than twenty yards now, for Alhassan was taking the lead. She was keeping to the very lip of the bank, which rose smoothly ahead of her to the summit of cliff-faced Goshin Dutsi. He could see her sagging, swaying in the saddle.

Alhassan gained a lead of hard won yards. Still no possible descent to the stream-bed appeared, no possible ascent for man and horse to the opposite bank.

Balance gritted his teeth, and drove his bare heels into the pony's sides. But the pony was doing his utmost, and neither spurs nor quirt could have got more out of him.

The D.O. glanced round. Estimated his lead. Thirty yards, forty at the utmost. If it could be stretched to a hundred! Then he could leave his mount. Hurl himself somehow to the river-bed. Pull himself up one of those trailing vines to the other bank, and on foot, head off the fugitives.

Only one chance remained. Fifty yards lead. Pistol in hand he flung himself to the ground.

Twenty-five yards away, the further bank, and a moving target . . . he was panting, shaking, blood and sweat in his eyes.

An impossible risk. White clothes, white horse. They blended in one blur as they reached the point opposite. He took his finger from the trigger. But if not, she would throw herself from the cliff!

The long pistol moved up, checked, swung with the

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target, swung ahead of it, jerked back and up with the heavy recoil.

Woman and horse appeared to crumple up.

CHAPTER XXVII

IN two strides Balance was at the edge of the high bank. No time to pick his way. He jumped out over the edge hoping the fall would not break an ankle, would not damage him enough to prevent him reaching the struggling heap of woman and horse on the further bank.

Somehow the pistol was back again in his holster, and both hands were free to grasp at washed-out roots, at creepers. Somehow, after a scrambling fall that filled eyes and mouth with sand and earth, he was racing across the flat, rocky stream-bed. Somehow he was at the opposite bank, fighting against overhanging roots, twigs and grass coming away in his hands, falling, and climbing again.

The woman had crawled clear, and was now trying to rise, but the horse lay kicking in agony. Sick at heart John Balance put a merciful bullet in its brain and turned to the rider. The mad hunt was over, and the death of the white pony brought a revulsion of feeling. The woman looked absurd sitting up, her legs straight before her like a child on a nursery floor, but miles from anywhere.

"Where am I?" suddenly she spoke and put a hand up to pat her hair.

Balance did not answer. Why, when people were slightly dazed, did they always want to know where they were? "How am I?" would be much more sensible than "Where am I?"

Mrs. Winchester looked carefully behind and around her. Then, as if in afterthought, to her front. At sight of the

torn, bloody object standing pistol in hand before her she gave a moan of fear.

"Don't be silly." Awkwardly he twiddled the pistol, then put it away. What did you do with women? You could go over a man carefully to see nothing was broken, then tell him to damned well get up and walk. But this was an absurd situation!

A kite had dropped from the sky to inspect the still warm body. It sailed slowly backwards and forwards, and caught the D.O.'s attention. Soon it would be joined by others. Then would come the disgusting vultures, and the merry game would begin. Poor old white pony!

"I suppose you really would have thrown yourself off Goshin Dutsi?" Angrily he turned back to Mrs. Winchester. "Or did I kill this poor brute for nothing?"

In this sun she ought not to be without a hat. He looked about for it. Then remembered that she had left it hanging on his chair. His own head was bare as his feet were, but he wasn't thinking of himself. Somehow he must get this woman safely back.

"Can you stand? Try!" Clumsily but kindly he helped her to her feet. She took a few shaking steps, and re-assured he removed his arm, leaving a handprint of blood and sweat on her silken sleeve.

Defeated in her plan of suicide, her will, even her power to think, seemed to have gone. Slight, pathetic, puzzled, she awaited instructions.

"If you can walk now, we had better go. We're miles from home."

"Two miles," her voice was colourless. "I often ride out this way."

"Then you'll know if there's any place where I can lead

Alhassan across the river-bed."

"Alhassan?" She was still a little dazed.

"My pony!" Balance pointed across the gulf. Alhassan, riderless, had swung in a circle and now waited almost on the spot where his master had slipped off his back. Balance called the pony's name re-assuringly, and saw his ears prick forward.

"There is only the place where I crossed."

"Then I'm afraid you'll have to go on foot to that point. Smart trick, the way you threw me off there and at the thorn brake!" John Balance, unconscious of his own dramatic appearance, was intentionally matter-of-fact.

Twenty paces convinced the man that his bare soles were picking up all the thorns in the country. With a word of explanation and instructions to 'keep on going,' he turned from the woman and sought a way down to the river bed.

In cold blood the drop was uninviting, and he cast about cautiously for a not too suicidal descent. He found himself at the bottom at no greater cost than a torn toe-nail. At normal times this would have been exquisitely painful, but his weariness, and the acute discomfort of lacerations and embedded thorns reduced it to a minor irritation.

Strips of sand, and occasional rocks were a relief to his bare feet. He lifted one sole to extract a thorn, then called to Alhassan to follow. Head down, cautiously sniffing, the pony found his way to the bank overhead and looked down, then began intelligently to follow along the top. By good luck the single rein had caught on the bridle behind the cocked ears.

John Balance looked up at the bank on his left. Yes, Mrs. Winchester was following too. He could just see her head bobbing slowly along. Her thick hair would save her

from sunstroke, though her shoulders might get blistered. He began to be conscious of his own needs, pulled off an already torn strip of his bath-robe and wrapped it turban-wise about his head. That felt better, though the heat in the dry river-bed was oven-like. The high, almost vertical banks cut off the ripple of breeze that stirred above. He envied woman and pony up higher, in the fresher air.

He wondered how far it was to the path that Mrs. Winchester had taken across the river-bed. It ought to be about half-way, or rather nearer Goshin Dutsi than the rest-house. And she had said that the whole distance was two miles. Minute by minute the heat grew stronger as he struggled on scorching feet along the tortuous river-bed. Walking slowly because of Mrs. Winchester, half dazed by the oven heat around him and the blazing sun overhead, the mile seemed unending. Then, at last, the crossing. Both banks had been broken down, by some natural cause no doubt, the way improved and flattened by the passage of herds of nomad cattle.

It was a relief to scramble up the sandy slope to where Alhassan waited at the top. A relief to mount, and ride him slowly across and up the other side to meet the tired woman. Not so pleasant, though, to dismount again upon his sore feet and lift the woman up in his place.

"You'd better ride on and leave me," the tattered scarecrow looked up at Mrs. Winchester. "Change ponies at my house, or anyway get a saddle there, and anything else you want. As soon as you have time, drop me a note saying what story you decide to tell to account for things."

"I've been trying to think." Her voice was hoarse. She licked her dry lips. "I shall tell my husband the truth."

"Excellent! Far the safest plan!" Through his wear-

ness he sounded almost enthusiastic. "No one else has a right to know. But to account for the pony, tell them he got hopelessly injured, and I was fortunately at hand to finish him off. True enough as far as it goes."

"And you?" Mrs. Winchester had recovered sufficiently to feel interest in the torn object before her.

"Oh my boys will say nothing. My horse took me into a thorn brake, you know."

Everything was settled for the moment. But he continued holding the bridle. Seemed reluctant to let her go.

"Please . . . er . . .," John Balance hesitated. "You won't try to do it again, will you?" His voice was gruffly emotional, like a boy asking an embarrassing favour.

The tone as much as the request restored a measure of self-esteem and poise to the tired woman; aroused her curiosity. She discovered her small vanity case in a jodhpur pocket. Strange that with, at this time and place, so unemotional a man . . .

"You see Alhassan's too decent an old hoss to ride over a precipice."

Mrs. Winchester put back the vanity case. Hastily she urged the 'decent old hoss' into a reluctant canter.

John Balance, plodding slowly after, wondered at her haste.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE sound of a car lurching to a creaking stop penetrated the dim coolness of the rest-house. John Balance, combining the need for haste and his desire for a long soak, was taking lunch in his bath. Only a cup—his fifth—of hot, weak tea now remained as evidence of the meal. But a further kettleful of hot water had been added to the perilously full tub.

Blazing hot liquids inside and out had re-started the sweat, staving off heat-stroke. Almost comfortable again, Balance lit a pipe and continued to extract long, black thorns with the point of a brutal hunting knife. Occasionally he cursed, slopped some bath water over the scene of excavation to clear the blood away, and gouged afresh. Some of the thorns were deep and obstinate.

A car door slammed, and a white man's voice called. "Boy!" Then again, in impatient haste, "Boy! Any boy here?"

Knife and one foot poised above his head, Balance listened as the heavy shoes stamped angrily on to the verandah.

"Sit down, Winchester, and let the boy give you a drink. I'll be out in a moment."

Reluctantly he lifted himself out of the soothing hot water and dabbed tenderly with a large towel. Socks and

shoes were infernally uncomfortable, but old, grey flannel trousers and a worn linen shirt open at the neck chafed only in spots: spots probably where thorns or cuts still called for treatment. Shaving had been bravely faced before the bath. John Balance brushed his stiff, black hair, then picking up his cooling tea went out on to the verandah.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

At the quiet voice, Winchester put his glass down and made a hurried movement to rise. But Balance slipped quickly into another chair, forestalling the other's excuse to get up.

"Look here, Balance. What in hell have you been doing with my wife?" Winchester, massive, flushed, twisted in his chair to face the D.O. "And what in hell is making that fool Shamaki sit on a bucket in the middle of the road to the lorry park, so that I can get no tin shipped in to Railhead?"

"Good man! Is he really there still?" Balance took a final sip and put his cup down. Winchester, supported on his arms and still craning his head round did not seem to share the enthusiasm. Possibly it was in part due to the discomfort of his position, which would not permit even an effective display of anger.

"He's there. He's most excessively polite; even goes through all the motions of a deep obeisance, but without removing his damned behind from the damned bucket." This seemed to increase Winchester's anger. He choked and turned his neck at a less acute angle. "But he says those are your orders,—that he shall sit there just like that and wait for you—and by God he seems to know how to obey orders!"

"Yes, he's a good man. Have another drink? What

was it, beer?" Balance called Amadu and the glass was refilled. The D.O. ordered another pot of tea. He still felt like a sun-dried jellyfish.

"Yes, but who's mad, he or you?" Winchester mollified a little by another cold drink relaxed backwards into a recumbent position.

"I am! Notoriously so, according to Paige-Thomas! Balance grinned. Then helped himself to fresh tea. "But whenever you're ready we'll go and relieve the *dogari*. He's a retiring man, and must hate all the notice he's getting. I'll fetch a coat."

Winchester's first burst of anger was expended. But as the D.O. came out again, thrusting things into his pockets as he walked, the Manager finished his beer and confronted him.

"Thanks in advance for letting my lorries get on with their work! Now I'd like to know what happened to you and my wife this morning." Winchester's manner changed. He looked quickly round to see if there was any danger of being overheard. "Between ourselves, Balance, this murder seems to have affected her very queerly, but I can't believe that she really intended to commit suicide."

Winchester was asking reassurance against a thought he dreaded. John Balance stood up and gave a friendly smile.

"By God, I'll knock that grin off your face!" The husband, red of face, was abruptly standing before Balance. His changes of mood, too rapid for Balance to follow, were the indication of his perturbation. "She didn't care a thing for that swine Culver, and his death meant nothing to her!"

Winchester shuffled his feet as though pawing the ground—the primitive action of the wild animal ready to spring.

Balance laid down his pipe in case a fight should be forced upon him.

"Have you also been suspecting her of killing him?" Balance's voice was cold, unemotional.

"My God! Did she think that too? How could she? I never gave a sign . . ."

"I was persuaded that you suspected her by your hiding the fact that she gave Culver the ammunition. Nothing else would account for your lying about it."

"You seem to know a devil of a lot about things." The Mine Manager was aggressive, challenging. But Balance saw beneath this the pathos of a hurt, puzzled boy, whose unquestioning acceptance of home and happiness has proved insecure.

"Give me a lift in your car." Balance led him by the arm. They picked up helmets. "I'll tell you all that's good for you on the way."

Winchester's driving was usually heavy-handed, and the story he heard, cautious and reticent as it was, tore cruelly at his self-esteem. With accelerator and brakes the car also was made to suffer. Balance, a lover of machinery, swore inwardly at the jerking, bucketing progress, but continued the treatment. What was it an old sergeant major had said?—"You 'as to break 'em afore you can make 'em, sir!"

The final medicine, the information that Mrs. Winchester had attempted suicide not for her own sake but to save her husband, was administered as they drew up to Shamaki, sitting patiently on his bucket in the middle of the road. The result was a violent dry-skid. Shamaki complete with bucket, leaped to safety.

Even before the car came to rest Balance was out, stoop-

ing over the ring mark left by the bucket.

"Dunlop Fort! What in the name of . . ." The puzzled frown left his face. He slapped his leg. "I see. Of course!" A quick interchange of question and answer, and Shamaki the *dogari* made obeisance, departing with his bucket.

Winchester, absorbed in his own wild hopes and fears, appearing to see and hear nothing, was again speaking.

"Then you believe that Lois . . . that my wife had nothing to do with Culver's death?" His reticence gone, Winchester was asking for reassurance, pleading for encouragement to hope again. "She told me of papers, of letters she had . . ."

"More fool she!" Balance was angry for the first time. "But why can't you, her husband, believe her innocent, when I can? If I had thought her guilty, would I have taken the risk in shooting her horse? I was as likely to hit her as her horse, and if I had killed her, who would have believed my story that I was trying to prevent her committing suicide?"

Balance could see horror, belated fear at the risk his wife had run, grow on the broad, red face. Something like reawakened hope also began to express itself there. Balance was administering a risky but powerful restorative. He tried a final dose.

"If I, a casual acquaintance who had known Mrs. Winchester a bare two days, could believe her innocence sufficiently to risk my name, my standing as a District Officer, perhaps even my liberty or life, must you, her own husband, continue to think her guilty of murder?"

Unconsciously the Manager had taken the road to the Mine Offices rather than the drive leading to his house

where the presence of Mrs. Winchester would embarrass discussion. Pre-occupied with growing hope, habit had brought him to his office door. As he turned the ignition switch and stepped out, Balance followed.

"Now" The D.O.'s manner returned to normal. "I'd be glad of some help you can give me in your office. The case against the real murderer still requires proof."

The office was reasonably cool in contrast to this drive through the blistering heat. Winchester, eager to help, produced records that the D.O. wanted, records that he could have no possible use for, and opened his confidential files cabinet and dragged out more. His tense anxiety of a few minutes ago appeared to find relief and outlet. He gathered obvious satisfaction from the nature of the D.O.'s occupation. This scrutiny of the service records of the Mine's white employees was an obvious corroboration of the statement that Mrs. Winchester was no longer suspected. He even carried a typewriter from the clerk's office to his own private office for Balance's greater convenience—to the latter's naïve stupefaction.

When the Manager offered to bring a cushion across from his house, Balance realised that work would be impossible with Winchester's solicitously anxious assistance. He looked at his watch—the clerks had long since left—and made banal comment on the way time had passed. In a few words he sketched Mrs. Winchester's certain anxiety if her husband, who had gone away almost beside himself with rage and anxiety, did not return to tea. Impelling him forward with this new anxiety, he got the Manager outside the door, promising to shut up when he left, accepting an invitation to drinks, thanking him for his help.

THE MYSTERY OF THE FLAMING HUT

With relief he heard the car move off. The light was already growing dim in the well-shaded office when he settled down to work.

(The style & the language of
the book is magnificent. A worthy
writer of detective novels' —

A ~~very~~ reader

CHAPTER XXIX

BALANCE locked up the office, and gave the key to the waiting night-watchman. The evening air was fresh after the stuffiness of the low, grass-roofed, mud-walled building. Sun helmet in hand, coat slung over his arm, he cut across the square in the direction of the tennis-court. Too late for tea, too early for drinks, he could fill in time watching a game.

The ruins of Culver's hut lay in his path. Broken parts of the wall had already been repaired with round bricks of sun-dried mud, mud-cemented, mud-plastered. Bamboos and neat bundles of grass stood nearby, awaiting the roof-makers. Good man, Winchester! He'd already got to work to obliterate the signs of tragedy. In this incessant fight of white man against the Tropics, it was just such details that helped to keep up morale.

Kartel and Winchester were playing Marren and Paige-Thomas. Bennerton, still sweating from a previous game, made room for him on a wooden bench. His movements were listless, and his face tired—far too tired for a young man. He gave the impression of disappointed, shrivelled old-age, despite his pink face and body still plump and unwasted by the Tropics. Balance, from long experience diagnosed the trouble at a glance. The man was in the early stages of what was called 'acclimatisation.' West Africa was slowly wrecking his physique, and his mind was still normal enough to rebel and make him mentally miserable. Later, if he survived, he would become inured to the

feeling of continual unfitness, be reconciled to the day-long dull headache, derive a crooked comfort from the thought that he was now 'acclimatised.'

A few casual remarks, an unfruitful attempt at conversation, and Balance, with kindly understanding, withdrew his attention from Bennerton's shaky hands, his taut-voiced and reluctant answers to assume a deep interest in the tennis.

The game scarcely merited close attention. The players were good; Kartel of the dark, impassive face was worth his place in a county six. But the usual bad background, dazzling light and staleness of the players robbed the game of any keenness. Tennis and other games are religious rites in the Tropics, performed day after day for unending weeks for the sake of the Liver, the Bowels, and such other gods as are alternately scourged and placated by their devotees. For this the games suffer.

The play lay mainly between Marren and Winchester. The Manager, planted solidly on the flat of his feet, hit firmly, emphatically, whilst Marren, across the net, seemed in contrast to bounce and dive all over the court, colliding even with a ball-boy spreadeagled against the stop-netting. Paige-Thomas' game was deceptive. His long reach and effortless movement made him appear lazily careless, and only close scrutiny revealed his speed and accuracy. He and Kartel seldom came into the game, though it's general course, it's strategy, seemed in their control.

A wild stroke of Marren's—obviously intended for Kartel's side-line took Winchester in the wind. The final point of game and set. The light would be too bad to continue.

"Sorry to leave you on the side-lines," Winchester handed his racket to a ball-boy. "You should have borrowed some gear and played."

"I've had enough exercise to-day." John Balance smiled amiably. "An amusing game to watch anyway. How on earth does Marren crash about like that without taking a nose-dive?"

"Me own invention. Non-skids!" Marren held up one foot in explanation. "Soles made of slices of old motor tires that a native leather-worker sews on for me. I'm the only one that knows the secret." He drew Balance aside mysteriously. "Ye take off the canvas, and pare the rubber from the inside to make it flat. And then ye wet the needle . . . *must* wet the needle!"

"You'll all come to drinks with me, of course." Winchester had supervised the slacking of the net. "The boys can look for the lost ball. I opened a new box to-day, and we're running rather short. Come along."

The sweet scent of tropical flowers rose from the Manager's compound. As the men swung silently up the drive in their tennis shoes, natives could still be heard watering the vegetable garden beyond the passion-flower fence. The whole garden had the soothing odour of an English country-side after a summer shower. Silently, the jerkiness of taut nerves smoothing out of their strides, they passed in single file up the path on to the lawn where chairs and low drink tables alternated in a semi-circle. Mrs. Winchester advanced to greet them, a cool, refreshing incident, in a sheer, sleeveless frock of gay India print.

The sun, red but unglaring, dipped behind the oleanders as the first drinks of the evening were sipped in grateful silence. Mrs. Winchester motioned to a houseboy to pass round cigarettes.

"Tell us about the day's sleuthin', Balance." Paige-Thomas broke the silence. "Though it looks as if you'd

been fightin' a cat instead of callin' up Watson and the pocket lens."

Balance grinned and continued to fill his pipe. He had done his best with the few scratches where his bent arm had not protected his face, and had hoped they would pass unnoticed.

"Get any results from the matches and cigarette ends you collected?" Kartel, serious, leaned forward.

"The Scientific Method, as applied to Cigarettes." John Balance picked on the last speaker as the recipient of his lecture. "Ahem! I trust all students have their note-books ready? And will the gentlemen at the back of the hall kindly refrain from shuffling their feet? The acoustics are—ahem!—lamentably deficient . . . lamentably. Lady students . . .," he looked sternly at Mrs. Winchester, "will defer the dropping of pencils until the lecture reaches its conclusion, when the more gallant gentlemen may vie in their recovery."

"A drink, Balance?"

"Rather! Same again, please. I mean—ahem!—a little refreshment would not be inopportune. Before the Chair of the Regius Professor in Comparative Criminology was established at this University, the study of cigarette ends and matches was in a stage of evolution which we may characterise, not without truth, as embryonic. The application of the Scientific Method has, however, already commenced to afford results.

"What is a cigarette?" He paused rhetorically.

"Please teacher, I know!" Paige-Thomas held up a hand and snapped his fingers. Balance silenced him with a pseudo-pædagogic frown.

"It is a means of indicating both the height of the

criminal, and the day and time at which the cigarette was smoked.

"As to his height. Let us take that first. It is a well established fact that the speed of combustion, and therefore the nature of the resultant products, both gaseous and solid, varies with the height of the combustible above sea level. For in extremely rarified air, combustion, just as breathing, becomes difficult for lack of oxygen in sufficient quantities. Analysis of ash and the charred termination of the cigarette will now give the height above sea level at which the cigarette was smoked. Many thousands of cigarettes were smoked by the Faculty before they ventured to publish the tabulated results. But these results are now accepted throughout the police forces and private detective agencies of the world.

"By taking the height of combustion, and deducting the height of the locale above sea level, the distance between the mouth and the soles of the feet of the smoker is readily obtained. From this figure with equal facility may be obtained the height of the criminal." John Balance beamed upon his puzzled audience and took a drink.

"Eh, but you're forgetting the variation in barometric pressure, and . . . and . . . the man might draw hard or gently." Kartel lodged his serious protest.

"Small matters, small matters. The method is yet uncorrelated to certain considerations." John Balance swept away the objection with a curl of smoke. He was enjoying himself. "Indeed, in a recent case, the criminal smoked a cigarette in a sitting posture whilst he gloated over his victim. Measurements as a result were falsified, and a dwarf was arrested."

"And what happened then?" Mrs. Winchester, too,

had interest in averting enquiry into the day's occupation of the District Officer.

"Oh, his barrister got him off." He thought a moment. "Pleaded '*De minimis non curat lex*' you know 'the law careth not for little things,' so they let the dwarf go."

Winchester, who had been chuckling heavily, threw back his head and roared. Then the smoke of his rank cheroot made him choke. Marren seemed puzzled by the mixture of fact and pseudo-science.

"Now for the timin' and datin' of the event." Paige-Thomas urged on the mock professor.

"Data, gentlemen, data are the fundamental basis of all scientific methods. To determine the time and data at which combustion took place in the cigarette, complete meteorological records are first required. Observation of the moss upon the cigarette, which never occurs on its south, east, or western sides, gives us at once the direction in which the cigarette was held. The prevailing breeze results in uneven burning, leaving a fragment of charred rice-paper protruding upon the windward side. It is at this juncture that the accurate meteorological records are needed. Having determined the precise direction from which the wind blew, we have but to search the records to discover time and date when it blew in this foreknown course. Am I clear?"

People who meet together nightly in a small station go bankrupt for news or fresh topics of conversation. With the mutual distrust underlying the apparently friendly relations between the miners there was special cause to welcome any diversion. Kartel, now that he saw the discourse was merely frivolous, was also beginning to enjoy it.

John Balance was not so happy. Enquiries about his day's doings would be awkward. He was free to invent a

pretext for leaving the gathering, but had good reason for wishing to stay. He looked round for the sun. It had sunk, but the afterglow would last some time.

"This, gentlemen, exhausts our lesson for the day. But I see," John Balance glanced at an imaginary pocket watch, "that our hour of studies has not elapsed. There are certain points in connection with used matches which, though as yet unsystematised, may not be without interest.

"You will have observed in what different manners people strike matches. Recklessly, as does Winchester, breaking about one match in five, and damaging most of the others. Kartel, cautious as Winchester is reckless, places the tip of his second finger on the actual head of the match, slightly scorching his skin."

Kartel looked surprised.

"Will any gentleman kindly examine Kartel's finger in the interests of science, and announce the result of his investigation? I am right? Thank you. The extra pressure he applies also results in a flat on the otherwise rounded head of the match. Paige-Thomas pushes the head along the striking surface instead of pulling it, as the rest of us do."

Paige-Thomas nodded in somewhat surprised confirmation.

"Microscopic examination should of course reveal the unusual direction of the scratches scored on the head by the frictive surface. Good word 'frictive,' wonder if it exists? Now Marren is again different in his method. One may observe him rub the match lightly several times as though to warm it, before he gives it the smart pull which results in its ignition. This would of course suggest to the observant student that he has spent the early part of his life in a

damp climate, possibly Ireland. Am I right in my surmise?"

Marren, as obviously Irish as a dudheen pipe, tried to speak amid the general laughter.

Balance was becoming anxious. His stock of mock-detective theory was running short, and there was still enough light to find one's way home without a lamp.

"People's origins show in many ways. The Stamp of Circumstances is the Mould of Man. That's a good one on the spur of the moment! Winchester comes from south-western England, probably Devon. Kartel can be placed more accurately. Definitely in or near Glasgow. Probably some little distance to the outside. Anyway he was brought up, if not born, at a place where two large roads meet a small stream. There ought to be a bridge there of some sort, probably a stone one. No, this isn't thought transference or anything like that. All my data is such as a country policeman could deal with. But I'm right, so far? Excellent!"

This was mysterious. Laughter and chuckles changed to puzzled interest. Here and there the creak of a chair gave evidence of a man changing position in the darkness.

"Paige-Thomas is the most difficult problem. So much overlays his original traits. Sort of 'overburden' as you call it, deposited by later conditions. He's been so long away from his original surroundings that he clearly has few ties. That means without doubt that he'll have gravitated to London at such times as he's been in England. Unattached men of his age and type always do, if they belong to the south of England as he obviously does. I mustn't give the trick away, though, or it will sound too easy, and I shan't get any applause. Let's be definite. Sounds better.

He's leased a flat in Town on and off during the last ten years when he's been home, and given a Bank as his address. The rest is harder. You came from Essex of course. Do you know during what hours chemists shops are open?"

The question sounded irrelevant, but Paige-Thomas took it seriously.

"Not a notion. I've an idea they're open all night for dispensin'. But don't rely on me. Why?"

"Your father was almost certainly in one of a limited number of professions. That wipes out doctor from the list, as in that case you'd have known about chemists' shops. A very useful elimination too, since doctors are spread all through the county, whereas architects, lawyers and so on weren't—when you were young and motors few to be found in villages away from the main towns. But I mustn't give it all away.

"You'll be interested to hear," Balance continued, "that the probabilities are now reduced to three places. And I'm blest if I know which to choose. Still, it's more effective to be definite." He paused as if for thought. "Let's sum up. Before your ten years of occasional visits to London on leave you had a break of some years—war you know—when you had too little time in England to leave a trace upon you. But your formative years were spent in a quiet country town in south-east England. The name of that town is the county town of Essex—Chelmsford!"

"Great Baddow." Paige-Thomas' voice came from the darkness.

"Ye're wrong Balance for once!" Marren was frankly jubilant. "Ye see"

"On the contrary, Balance, the wizard, is right to within

a mile. I'll swear it isn't guessin', but . . ." Paige-Thomas sounded awed but incredulous.

A table lamp came winking down from the house. As the servant found place for it among the glasses Balance looked at his wrist watch.

"Later than I thought. I must go." He stood up, and began to say good-bye.

"Have another drink, and tell us the trick while a boy brings a lamp for you." Winchester voiced the general wish.

"Tell you the trick when this Culver business is over." Balance produced an electric torch from his pocket, the bulb end hidden in his hand. "Marren left his torch at my house last night, and I'll borrow it, if I may. It is his, isn't it?"

Marren himself claimed it. It's unusual green casing was enough identification. Then fear showed suddenly in his face. He licked his lips and swallowed.

"Give Mr. Marren a drink, dear." Mrs. Winchester was the first to notice that something was wrong.

"Don't trouble. I think I'll go home. The sun or something."

"I'll see you home, then borrow your light, if I may, to find my way back to the rest-house." John Balance took Marren's arm. "Good night, and many thanks for the drinks."

CHAPTER XXX

MARREN'S hut in its extreme untidiness, gave an air of squalor. A camp bed, on which were jumbled the clothes Marren had taken off for tennis, and, at the end opposite the door, deep shelving, reaching to the grass roof, took up most of the available space. Pictures of girls, and cuttings from *La Vie Parisienne*, were pinned to the mud wall, and appeared to have been to the taste of the white-ants. Socks and half a shot-gun mingled with a pile of shoes in one corner. Other corners also contained mixed cargoes, whilst the contents of the shelving gave the impression of having been well stirred.

John Balance found his way to an upturned box that stood against the table, and had leisure to examine the room in detail while his host strove with the reluctant wick of an oil reading lamp.

"It's kind ye were, holding your peace before the Manager." The Irishman seated himself shakily on the end of the camp bed, beneath the tucked up net.

"I thought it would be easier for you to explain without a large audience." The District Officer laid the ruined electric torch upon the table. "It is fairly obvious that someone else is involved, and you may not want it generally known."

"Ye're a queer one." He eyed the D.O. with doubt replacing fear. "And why will I be telling ye?"

A servant entered with two thick glasses and a bottle of

water. He was clumsy on his feet, undeft with his hands, still carelessly swathed in the grimy blanket in which he had been sleeping when his master returned. Marren searched two boxes, and with triumph produced a bottle of whiskey.

Balance waited until the door banged behind the slovenly native boy.

"Last night you laid yourself open to a charge of entering a dwelling-house between the hours of sunset and sunrise with intent to steal. It is the local equivalent of burglarious entry, and as serious a crime."

The Irishman, pouring out drinks for himself and his guest, put the bottle down with a bang.

"To hell with ye and the Government!" The belligerency of fear was in his voice. "Someone, a stealing black nigger maybe, robbed me, and then went with my torch to rob ye. I'll not be tricked!"

"Stole your shoes too? Thoughtfully returned them to you in time for tennis? Happened to be your height and build? With super cunning even disguised his way of walking and moving as that of a white man? Cut a piece of your handkerchief to fit over the lens of the torch? Walked back to your hut afterwards?" With slow patience John Balance dealt his hand.

Marren was weakening.

"It is difficult for you to believe it, but even the Village Head expected someone would attempt to rob me. He insisted that he should post a *dogari* guard. But I expected a different kind of robbery, and by a white man instead of a native.—I'm being frank with you Marren, and expect you to be the same with me.—Since I'm not keen on white men being arrested by natives and clapped into a native

goal, I decided to do without a *dogari*. When you came I could have killed you easily, but that would have been pointless. I could have wounded you as a simple means of identification. But instead I shot your torch out of your hand, and went to a lot of trouble in tracing you afterwards rather than harm you and put you in a position where the whole thing would have been made public. I'll be frank again and admit that it wasn't you I expected. But since you've put yourself in the trap you'd better take the easiest and shortest way out of it . . . by telling me the truth!"

"Ye're a smart man Balance, and by Jesus I'm a fool!" Marren leant forward and slid a glass across the table. "Take a drink with me, while I tell ye the truth. But will ye now believe me?"

"I'll try! But make it easy for me." Balance smiled reassuringly, then stifled a yawn. "Make it short, too, if you can. The only time I spent in bed last night was when you were in my hut. And as you know, I wasn't asleep then!"

At first unwillingly, then with increasing assurance Marren told his story. He and Paige-Thomas had taken drinks with Kartel on the previous evening. Feeling about the D.O's investigation had been adverse, almost bitter. It was close to an opinion that the dead man had deserved what he got, and that it would be a moral injustice if anyone, white or black, were to be punished for ridding the world of him. An amazing outburst of feeling, it seemed to have been.

Marren, searching vaguely for a tin of cigarettes, pouring himself another drink, tried to touch lightly on this situation. John Balance noted the tactful intention but managed to extract a full impression of the indignation meeting.

Kartel would be glowering blackly, forgetting nothing, pardoning nothing that the dead man had done. His strict Presbyterian conscience judging the facts, would allow no plea of pressure of temperament, circumstances or temptation to abate his disapproval. Dispassionately, bleakly, he would condemn.

Paige-Thomas would say little. Nonchalantly perhaps he would add a fact or correction, his long frame carelessly relaxed in a deck chair. Bored, mildly scoffing.

Marren's attitude was repeated as he described the meeting. Dramatically he waved his glass, spilling whiskey on his pillow. Where the Scot condemned the loose-living Culver, but reserved judgment on his murderer, Marren held almost reverse views. The virtues and vices of the deceased interested the latter only to the extent that they gave the Irishman seeming justification for a passionate resentment of the law which sought to punish the murderer.

Then Paige-Thomas had mentioned that Balance was preserving the dead man's papers. Kartel was uninterested, but Marren had seen in this another injustice to Someone or to Something.

John Balance accepted another glass of whiskey and water, unpleasantly warm. He was learning a lot. Himself always on the side of the Law, its representative in fact in all its phases as Policeman, Judge, even, on occasion as Sheriff and Hangman, he had for long seen only one side of the question. To him the Law was the rough but only practicable method of securing justice. Provided its servants were honest—and anything else was to him unthinkable—it was utterly impartial. Impartiality had seemed to him a supreme virtue. Yet it was this very impartiality to which the Irishman so passionately and altruistically objected.

And in his objection appeared to have the support of Kartel a Scot, and Paige-Thomas, typically English. A disturbing thought.

Balance refilled his pipe from his trouser pocket once more. Steadily the pile of ashes grew in the saucer which Marren had produced as an ash-tray. The D.O. scarcely listened to his host's account of the preparations necessary to a successful burglary, the details of the attempt, the shock and the wrenched thumb when the torch had been shot away, the hurried, frightened escape with the fear of a bullet in the back. He checked, automatically, the Irishman's account with his own knowledge. Marren, he noted, had neither felt the black cotton break, nor, which was more surprising, been conscious of the clang of the warning device.

Marren finished his dramatic recital with a flourish, and seemed almost to expect applause.

"What papers did you intend to take?" The D.O.'s voice was coldly enquiring.

"I was wanting none. I thought I'd maybe destroy them a bit . . ."

"Why? Did you think they might indicate who the murderer was?" Balance was watching the Irishman closely. "Why not leave the murderer to cover his own trail?"

Marren gave no reaction.

"Wouldn't your doing it point to you as the murderer?" That was pointed enough, John Balance felt, to provoke response, whether Marren was guilty or innocent.

Marren's fingers twisted slightly, in a gesture of helplessness.

"But of course the murderer couldn't do it herself, could she Marren?" Blandly the D.O. put his question. The

reaction was immediate.

Bulges on Marren's temples showed the tightening of his jaw muscles as he restrained himself from impetuous reply. Balance watched, fascinated, as the Irishman mutely gave up his secret. The words 'herself' and 'she' in the D.O.'s question, which had evoked such immediate and active response could only refer to Mrs. Winchester. If Marren had been guilty, no hot denial would have sprung to his mouth at the thought that another person was suspected. However chivalrous, he would have welcomed the false scent.

"You've told me, though not in words, that you had nothing to do with the murder, but quixotically hoped to save Mrs. Winchester by destroying the evidence against her. Pretty damning you know! It's as if you said, 'Though wild horses wouldn't drag it from me, I've got conclusive evidence of Mrs. Winchester's guilt! And the proof of this is that I took very heavy risks in an attempt to destroy the evidence against her!'" John Balance made his point and waited.

Hot with indignation, the Irishman jumped to his feet.

"She's the swatest, decentest girl in this hell-country, and she'll take no harm from me . . . or from you either! I'd cut your liver from ye, John Balance, before ye'd be touching her! What matter if she killed him? Didn't he plague her with his attentions the way she'd be thinking the world of him? Didn't she wring her white hands at the thought of the letters she'd written him? She a married woman with a husband! And when he took the new girl in England, didn't she . . . ?"

Balance waited. But the Irishman, with belated caution pushed his glass away and sat down.

"Thanks Marren. I knew you weren't the murderer. But I wanted to know why you came for the papers. You see it was someone else I expected." The D.O. sounded friendly. "I think you would like to know that Mrs. Winchester has no idea how Culver actually met his death. It may help you to believe her innocent."

"Innocent?" First showed wonder, then wild delight. With a rush, Marren had spilt Balance's whiskey on his knees, and was shaking him violently by the hand.

"You in, Marren?" Winchester called from outside and someone knocked urgently at the door.

The Irishman dropped Balance's hand.

"Seen anything of our D.O.? Oh, there you are!" Winchester, followed by Paige-Thomas, stooped under the lintel and came in. "We've been hunting for you everywhere. Took the car down to your rest-house, but you weren't there. Stopped at the Village Head's place, but you hadn't been heard of. Forgot to enquire whether your horses were all present and correct, and began to wonder whether you'd ridden off sleuthing somewhere. Then P.T. remembered you'd gone off with Marren, so we tried here."

"We're not chasin' you for your beauty but for your use. Fact is, my horseboy's bolted, and I don't know yet whether he's taken anything or not . . . Except the horse!" Paige-Thomas perched himself cautiously on the corner of the washing-stand.

"I'd better note the details, description and so on. Got some paper and something to write with?"

There was a delay whilst Marren rummaged through his littered belongings. Paige-Thomas eyed the mess with open distaste. Winchester cleared a space on the bed and sat

down cautiously. The bed creaked ominously but stood the strain.

News of the horseboy's absence had come as Paige-Thomas was taking drinks with the Manager. He had simply ridden the horse away bareback in the morning. He had borrowed a native saddle from a friend—apparently because it would attract less attention and be less easily traced. But unfortunately for him this had caused comment in native circles, and had led to the houseboy's remembering that the other had gone off with a bundle tied up in a blanket and slung over his shoulder. According to the story, the other servants had then hastily checked through their few belongings, and finding these correct had broken open the door of the horseboy's hut. There they had found only a mat, too bulky to be taken without raising comment.

"Let's get that down." Balance pulled pencil and paper towards him. He scribbled rapidly, looked up.

"Name and description, please. Has he been with you long?"

"Five years, I think. A dam' good horseboy too. If it hadn't been for his takin' the horse . . . Let's see. He's average height for a native, a bit on the slender side, pock-marked slightly on the face, but without any other distinguishin' marks. You can take snub-nose, dark skin, dark eyes, shaven head for granted." Paige-Thomas waved a hand to indicate helplessness.

"Clothes, I suppose the usual horseboy's khaki trousers or shorts, with a white cotton vest and a fez on top? Yes! And don't tell me that his 'mufti' is sometimes a blue and sometimes a white gown? It is? My God!" Balance groaned in affected despair. "When he's in working kit

he's exactly like every other horseboy who ever was. When he's in mufti he'll be indistinguishable from all the other male Haussas. I suppose he is Hausa? He would be, of course! Pockmarks aren't a means of identification either, where half the natives have had small-pox."

"Any use my tellin' you his name? It's Saidu Kano. About as useful as 'Mr. Smith, of London,' I'm afraid." Paige-Thomas seemed mildly amused.

"It might have been Amadu. There are probably two million Amadus and only a bare million Saidus in this blessed country. And he would choose Kano, the biggest City in the north, as his birthplace. Once he's sold the horse there's nothing to mark him. You know . . . " Balance's face stretched in a cheery grin, ". . . the man couldn't have been better chosen for lack of identifiable characteristics if you had selected him from a whole countryside."

"If ye're wanting to send a message, there's a *dogari* outside my cookhouse. He's been there all day." Marren wanted to help.

"That'll be Sulai Yola. I hadn't time to ask Shamaki to whose doorstep he had traced your footsteps. But he must have followed them here, and then told his 'half-section.' Many thanks for the interesting talk and the drinks. I must go now." Balance turned towards the door. "What I need most is a spot of sleep. I've had about five hours in the last two days."

"But aren't you going to do anything about P.T.'s stolen horse?" Puzzled, Winchester too prepared to go. "I'll send a Company lorry off down the main road to stop and enquire at all the villages, and offer a reward. If you like, that is?"

"Paige-Thomas can write me a description of the pony, if he will. And to-morrow morning the *Kali* will call witnesses and issue a description of the missing man. He's very good at that sort of thing, as he sees shades of difference in native features and complexion that the white man is blind to."

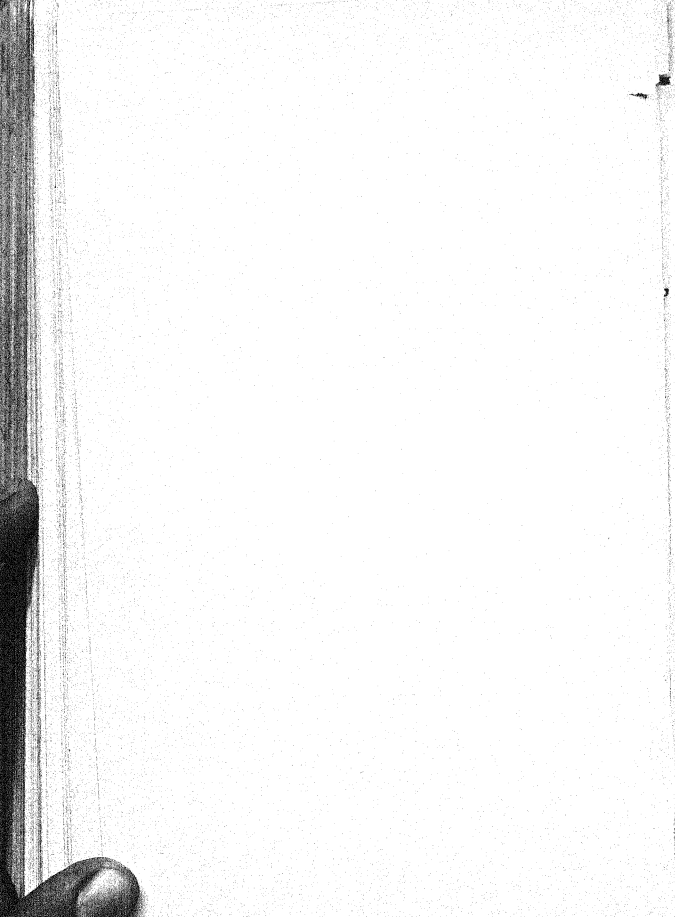
"If you don't mind my sayin' it, Balance, I think you're bein' a bit casual." Paige-Thomas for once appeared ruffled. "The best chance of catchin' my horseboy is before he's had time to get far away."

"Must say I agree with P.T." Heavily Winchester added his opinion.

"The boy will be brought back to-morrow evening." Balance was confident. "I've had a cordon of beggars, hunters, market women, and small boys round this place for days now. At an unobtrusive distance of several miles of course."

"A net to catch the famous murderer?" Paige-Thomas could not suppress the sneer.

"For the murderer? No! He won't run! A net for smaller fish." The D.O. divided his glance impartially between the three white men. "For the Crown witnesses. I can put my hand on the murderer at any time!"



PART VI

This is a very little book.

I thought it would be of some use to you.

Yours truly,

John



CHAPTER XXXI

THE Native Court was dimly cool, even chilly after the tropical sun outside. An odour of wood-smoke hung upon the still air, and the blackness of ceiling beams and arches showed that a fire was often needed to warm the long-columned hall.

It was John Balance's habit and pleasure to appear informally and often unexpectedly at small country courts. A chair, rickety, but such as white men use, would be hastily sought, and he would listen wrapt, intent, for long hours, whilst voices droned on and on in the dim, ecclesiastical atmosphere.

But only the most simple, simple-minded judges were quite free from uneasiness at such visits. For sometimes the reticence of a witness, sometimes an unexplained departure from the strict letter of the law would bring a baleful gleam to the dark eyes behind that beaky nose. Later, without fuss or publicity, detailed, searching enquiry would follow from which no acceptance of bribes or protection of criminals could be hidden.

John Balance, though hungry for a smoke, was enjoying himself. To his practised eyes the character of the *Kali* of Mafun was already established; a benign old scholar to whom the villagers in the surrounding countryside appealed as to a father. A little lenient to criminals, judging by his court record book, but that was a fault on the right side since the offences were mostly simple assault or petty theft.

One case enriched the D.O's already wide vocabulary

with a slang term for a pickpocket, and another—a divorce case—had given him a new insight into native family life. Then followed the case for which he waited.

"John of Asaba, also called *Dan Boyi*—the *Mufti* consulted his book—*Mariam*u, and other witnesses."

The *Kali* settled his legs more comfortably on his henna-stained sheepskin mat, and signed to the *dogari* acting as court usher, then looked across to the District Officer to see if he had noted. The crowded audience whispering, swayed sideways where they sat to open a way for the prisoner and escort.

John of Asaba, servant of the dead Culver, came through the gap in the squatting robed figures, followed by a *dogari*. Scared but defiant he answered the *dogari's* pressure on his arm and sank to ground in salutation before the *Kali's* dais. The charge and particulars of the charge were read out. In the formula of English law the charge was equivalent to "Being in possession of stolen property, knowing it to be stolen."

John raised his head, relief in his very pose.

The District Officer observed him closely. This was the first time they had met. The boy certainly did not look a criminal. A decayed but cherished sun-helmet hung from his wrist, and he was dressed mainly in cast-off white men's clothes. He professed Islam, or he would not be here in a Mohammedan Court, and had a black skin. But otherwise this native of the south was as much a stranger among a strange people as was Balance himself. A thin, callow youth of perhaps twenty years old, appearing scarcely seventeen, large of feet and hands, a mat of short frizzy hair covering his round head, mouth and eyes wide open, breathing nervously.

"Have no fear if you are innocent and speak truth!" reassuringly the *Kali* addressed the accused. "But for the sake of the Prophet Mohammed, separate yourself from lies."

"The money is mine, given to me. I have stolen nothing . . ."

"It is well. But listen first."

An unknown *dogari* gave evidence of arrest, and of the searching of the accused before witnesses. Then followed long account of the property found in John's possession. Even the clothes he still wore had been included by the cautious policeman, as prisoners sometimes claim that a valuable robe has been taken from them after arrest. A surprisingly long list, two halves of a handkerchief in one of which was wrapped *tozali*—silver lead used locally as *kohl*—his master's keys, folding corkscrew, bottle opener . . . Slowly the *dogari*, with the marvellous memory of a native, recited the long catalogue, coming at last to his point.

"And inside his shirt a handkerchief with letters on it, containing seven pounds thirteen shillings, and a threepenny piece." The money was counted openly on a mat so that all men might see. Since John would not bear witness to the counting, but spoke bad white men's words, the money was counted thrice before seven witnesses.

"Whence came this large bag of money?" The *Kali* sounded sterner now. "If without wrongdoing you obtained it; speak now, and be released!"

John of Asaba stirred uncomfortably, but was silent.

Balance, watching, thought he understood the quandary. Saidu had scared John with the suggestion that he was suspected of killing Culver his master. Then the money as unexpected as rain in the dry season, had been thrust

upon him. His mind in a whirl, he had probably never heard Saidu's exhortation to run. He had just run, bolting as any animal will from threatening danger. And now he would probably prefer a charge of stealing to one of murder.

"I did not steal it. The money was given!"

"Given by whom, and for what purpose?" The native judge was clearly sceptical. "Such money as it takes a labourer a year to earn, is it given without cause?"

"It was a debt which was repaid me." John of Asaba was a poor liar.

"Who was the debtor, and who the witnesses? Such large sums do not pass save before witnesses."

The servant hung his head. The court waited.

The *Kali* made a sign to a court scribe, who rose and looked through a small window on one side of the dais, then returned to his place.

"Mariamu!" The *Kali* raised his voice slightly.

"I hear." Her voice came faintly through the window from the annex for women witnesses. Women are not permitted in court.

Mariamum gave her evidence of John's movements and his meeting with Saidu. It agreed exactly with her story on that warm night of languorous . . . Hastily John Balance switched his thoughts.

"The owner of so large a sum of money will be easily found. Unless, indeed . . .," an idea seemed to strike the benign, old judge for the first time, "the money was stolen from your dead master."

A suppressed murmur of horror ran through the court.

"Saidu shall be sought." The *Kali* turned to a scribe, who wrote hurried note. "And John of Asaba shall wait in prison."

Taking swift but ceremonious farewell, the District Officer went out into the bright sunlight and hurried back to work. Alhassan, none the worse for yesterday's adventure, broke into a gallop as soon as the crowded, colourful market-place was left behind. His speed and energy were comforting after the long court session. Not only this morning's enquiry by the aged *Kali*, but the whole investigation of the murder seemed to drag obstinately, of sheer inertia.

Last night the D.O's typewriter had again clicked spasmodically through the night. Two hours of sleep just before dawn had been the most that he could allow himself. Work, more general, but no less urgent, was calling him in other parts of the Division. Miss King, too, Culver's fiancée, what was she doing? She had not replied to the telegram. Had she returned home, or was she now nearing Railhead, shaken by the blow, but determined to press on to the scene of her lover's death and burial? There was every need to finish the case, and arraign the murderer. Or smooth it all over, and have a satisfying story of 'death by misadventure' ready for her.

Balance, sparks of dry native tobacco flying from his pipe as he galloped, was tired, irritable, despondent. It had been comparatively easy to discover the murderer. But was the evidence against him sufficient to commit for trial? He checked the points on his fingers as he rode. All night he had spent over the summary of evidence, strewing the floor with waste paper, producing in the end a bare nine pages of clear fact and cogent argument.

Near the rest-house another delay awaited him. Armed horsemen, native musicians, courtiers and jesters jammed the road, overflowing into the compound, filling the air

with dust and babble. This must be the *Ajiya* himself, the overlord of the Village Head, paying a call. More time must be wasted. The D.O. grunted his annoyance, as he slipped through the throng and dismounted before the rest-house.

To save time he advanced towards the shady tree under which sat a group clad in large turbans and gorgeous gowns. Before he was through the salutations a chair was brought.

"We waited," the old man with henna tinted beard gestured with ring laden hand towards the south-east, "but you did not come. Only the loads you sent before you, some thirty men with a *dogari* to lead them. Another day we waited. Then the Chief of Mafun sent word that the white man here was dead. Tck!" His face, wrinkled, grey-tinged with age, expressed urbane condolence. "Allah have mercy upon him, and requite his killer!"

"The net, which I asked you to spread around the village, was quickly cast?"

"Two hundred galloping horsemen spread it at the places I appointed, forming it of old women and young boys as you desired. Old women and young boys! Your plan was good. What could escape their curiosity?" The ancient ruler gave a yellow-toothed chuckle.

"One fish only remains to be caught. Then the net may be withdrawn, and rewards given. Saidu, a horseboy here, has run. A white man's servant, dressed as such are, without special marks . . ."

"But riding a grey horse? He is already taken. We met him on the road. For safety a *dogari* rode his horse and the horseboy walked behind."

John Balance was silent. Absent-mindedly he appeared

to be reading and re-reading the arabic inscription on the *Ajiya's* seal-ring. Self-consciously the District Head covered it in a fold of his embroidered robe.

"To-morrow I go from here." Balance had made his decision and was himself again. "If the Chief of Mafun will give me twenty carriers. Perhaps we may ride together on the road. But now you will be weary from your journey, and have not yet alighted at your house." He rose in courteous intimation that the audience was ended.

Farewell salutations accomplished, the D.O. turned again to the lesser Chief.

"Let the carriers come at dawn. But let them not spend the night in this compound as is the custom. For to-night I have much work, and desire peace."

A moment the Village Head waited for further instructions. Then whispered to the *Ajiya*.

"To-night, then, *Shafo*, the Hawk, stoops to kill. Who is the murderer?"

Faintly came the response, "*Kaito shi!* Woe to him!" Trumpets rang out as the *Ajiya* mounted.

John Balance turned sadly away.

CHAPTER XXXII

JOHN Balance, his eyes red from lack of sleep, mechanically sat down to lunch. Outside the rest-house was the dangerous blaze of the afternoon sun. Indoors the heat seemed to palpitate in the still air. From time to time his head nodded, was jerked upright, nodded again. Two large cups of coffee seemed to have no effect, and the stifling heat increased his weariness to sheer mental agony. With relief he stood up, lit his pipe and refilled his pocket with handfuls of loose tobacco.

"Let Shamaki and Sulai Yola be called!"

"They are outside, they await orders." Amadu swept up table-cloth and cup and hurried out.

When the red-robed policemen entered Balance cut his greetings to the minimum.

"The servants of Paige-Thomas, the tall white man with the mare, are known to you, and know you? . . . 'Tis good.

"You will exchange your uniforms for clothes such as villagers wear," he continued, "so that you may appear as though wishing to avoid notice. Then you will go and speak with the servants of that white man, telling them, if they do not know, that Saidu the groom who stole the horse has been arrested and brought back. But you will not reach there until their white man has returned from the office. This much is understood?"

"We hear." Sulai, the older *dogari*, spoke for both.

"You will also ask at what hour the white man will have gone from his house, leaving it empty. This only you will

do, and will then wait. You will wait through the evening, through the night, not sleeping. And at dawn you will return to me and report what you have seen, what you have heard."

Puzzled, but obedient, the red-robed *dogaris* repeated the orders, and withdrew.

Amadu appeared bringing a handful of letters and a "chit" from Winchester. "A servant of the Manager, with a bicycle waits for an answer."

Winchester's note wanted to know if Balance was busy, as the writer had something important to say. He would drive down straight away if he was likely to find Balance in.

More waste of time probably, still

Balance scribbled a hasty reply, and turned to the other letters. They must have come by a Mine lorry from Rail-head. The personal letters could wait, and he threw them, unopened, on the bed.

A long, official envelope, marked "*Secret and Confidential*," invited attention; and Winchester would not arrive for some minutes yet. Balance turned it over to verify that the crown seals of red wax had not been tampered with, then slit the end with a hunting knife.

'Officers on Tour' was the non-committal heading, but the body of the memorandum made the matter clear. The Resident had been informed that John Balance, District Officer, had spent his Christmas at Mafun Mine; that he was still staying there on the frivolous pretext of enquiring into the cause of death of the late Accountant, Mr. Culver. That there was no doubt as to the cause of death being accidental, and that the District Officer's enquiries and baseless suspicions were both hindering the work of the Mine and causing much pain to the friends of the deceased.

Balance noted the cautious reservation of opinion expressed by the recurrent "that." "The Resident" had been informed "that" so and so. A bit of a "stinker" this letter, on the face of it, but for the recurring "that." But the D.O. knew his superior too well. Pompous, sarcastic, with a dozen other qualities to inspire dislike, he had in the eyes of his juniors and natives alike one supreme virtue, a fanatic, almost bitter striving for plain justice undiluted by motives of expediency or "political considerations."

The last paragraph held the reason for the letter. Therein the District Officer was instructed to refer to a circular letter, of which the reference was given, which forbade Political Officers in the execution of their duties to stay with non-officials. Balance's immediate answer to the allegations was requested.

A day, two days earlier, when he had little but suspicions to work on, this would have been a difficult letter to answer. But now . . . ! John Balance smiled, and turned to a shorter note, written in the Resident's own hand.

"Dear Balance: An anonymous letter has been sent to the Powers higher up and is apparently believed by them. I trust it is a libel. Will try to get the letter, as you may be able to recognise the writing. Unless it's typed in this cursed modern fashion. Look for the man who has cause to fear you most, and you will find the anonymous writer. Meanwhile answer the charges. If you care to quote standing instructions that require all anonymous letters to be burned unread, I'll back you to the limit, and we'll give the Powers Higher Up hell. Hope you've not been an idiot. Yours . . ."

Almost a page of the crabbed handwriting. The Old Man, usually so laconic, was spreading himself! Probably

because the charge was brought anonymously. How the Old Man hated lack of courage and anything that seemed underhand! John Balance pinning the papers to the table with the point of his hunting knife, considered the situation.

Winchester would arrive at any moment now, but would be willing to wait a moment if necessary. The report on the case written last night admitted, incidentally, the D.O.'s sleeping one night at the Manager's house. It also related the facts concerning the Paymaster's death

With a clash of springs and a rattle of loose tools a car negotiated the rough road outside and came to a stop. A running-board creaked in the hot, tense air, and a door slammed.

. . . And the facts were what the Old Man lived on. Anyway there would be time to finish the enquiry. Personal defence could follow.

John Balance rose, stuffed the papers into his tin office box, and caught up his sun-helmet. As he reached the door, Winchester's bulk confronted him.

"Morning, Balance. Do you ever walk into one of these damned huts without bumping your head? I don't! But if I hadn't been so blasted polite I'd at least have had my hat on." The Manager stood blinking and rubbing his head.

"A good, fat aristocratic turban is the only head gear!" John Balance grinned commiseratingly. "Makes an effective crash-helmet, and good manners don't require you to take it off just at a critical moment."

"May I come in?" Mrs. Winchester ducked her head beneath the low grass cave. "And will my large husband kindly remove himself from the doorway? . . . Thank you."

"Come along in." Balance led the way from verandah

into the room behind. "Hope you're none the worse for your adventure of yesterday. May I order some tea, or is it too early?"

"I'd love some! Ooh! I like coming out to tea. An' may I pour out too, if I'm mos' awfully dwcadfully good?" For a moment her years and the strain of the tropics fell from her, and Balance saw the enthusiastic, greedy, little girl whom she mimicked. "Don't bother to have more chairs brought in. I'll sit on the bed with this husband of mine, if we may, and he can see that I behave properly. You see," she dropped again into the character of a little girl—a rather wistful little girl now—"I haven't been out to tea for lots an' lots of weeks, an' I haven't got many friends."

"I'll try to see she behaves, Balance, but I can't guarantee results." The bed creaked as Winchester sat down. "I left her sitting in the car . . ."

"He said that bachelor establishments in this country aren't always as bachelorish as a woman would think, so he would come and warn you first, before I appeared. I was afraid he would if I didn't hurry." She grabbed her husband's hand and leaned forward in well simulated enthusiasm, "*Dear Mr. Balance, kind Mr. Balance, do show me your wonderful houri and bulbul collections! I shall be so disappointed if you won't!*"

Mrs. Winchester's eyes searched slowly and blatantly round the room with its simple portable furniture. From the Turkish helio mirror, an ancient piece of war loot that still served as a shaving mirror, to battered tin uniform cases, everything was tidy, even polished, but severely masculine.

Balance, too accustomed to his surroundings to have observed them for many months, followed her glance round

the hut with interest. He felt a little anxious at the feminine scrutiny. Luckily his almost soleless socks and buttonless bush-shirts would be packed away in the uniform cases. Amadu could be relied upon to carry out ordinary routine for month after month without need of stimulus. But why on earth had he left the travelling tin bath, which should have been standing on its side outside in the sun, inverted beside the guns and row of boots? . . . The sort of thing that *would* happen on the only day that a woman came inside his rest-house!

Winchester put a large arm round Mrs. Winchester's waist and drew her closer to him on the seat. "Don't let Lois pull your leg Balance. She's decided that you're one of the world's best, and whatever you do or are won't change her opinion in the slightest. I know this woman of mine! She insisted on coming with me. Throw her out when she starts offering to make you curtains, or you're lost."

Winchester disengaged his arm as Amadu brought in the tea-tray. The tray, huge, oval, covered with a damask table-cloth puzzled Balance a moment. Then its outlines became familiar. The lid of the travelling bath! Gravely, with pride, the boy deposited his burden on the camp-table before Mrs. Winchester.

"Luxurious man!" Mrs. Winchester indicated the graceful silver tea set. "What does a mere man hidden away in Africa want with Georgian silver?"

"It should have been left at my headquarters. Amadu will again be cursed, perhaps the hundreth time, for bringing it on trek. The D.O. drew his thoughts back from the depths of weariness that engulfed them, and became conversational. "But the cursing does no good. Even now

he will be priding himself on the foresight that made him have it ready for your visit."

Mrs. Winchester, pouring tea, and nibbling at the fancy biscuits was obviously enjoying herself. Balance saw her hand drop beneath the table and Winchester's hand go to meet it. Winchester, catching his eye, became youthfully self-conscious, turned a little more red, but did not withdraw his hand.

"I envy you your servant, Mr. Balance. No one would know that you had just arrived here, and were likely to move on soon. Everything in the room looks as if it were exactly in its right place. But I wish . . . Can I give you some more tea? . . . Won't you send me up your clothes that need anything done to them, sewing you know, new collar bands, buttons missing, any socks that need darning."

Winchester burst into a roar of laughter, slapping his knee with the disengaged hand. "There you are, Balance! What did I tell you?"

"It's awfully kind of you, most awfully kind. . ." John Balance in his confusion lit a pipe, then remembering that his visitors had not finished their tea, put it down in his saucer. "Awfully kind, but," he groped again for a polite but solid and irrefutable excuse, "but I'm moving on to-morrow morning."

"No good asking who the murderer . . . ?" Winchester put down his cup with a clatter. "My God! You're not giving up the hunt, are you Balance?"

"No, but the hunt's at an end. I'd rather not tell you any more."

"But you're not going so soon?" The woman's grey eyes looked pathetic, imploring. "I—we—wanted to thank you. To . . . to . . ."

"Lois and I have been idiots, fools. Anyway I have been! And, Balance, you know you saved her life yesterday. It's quite true that each of us thought the other had put an end to that little swine."

"He's dead, George. Whatever he was doesn't matter now."

Balance saw the large man wince at the slight defence; saw him withdraw his hand in childish hurt.

"You do understand, George, dear? I don't mean that. But . . ."

"You see, Balance, you gave us both hell! About the one way you could have driven any sense through our layers of hate and suspicion. If you'd been vague and polite . . . but you weren't." Winchester was still rather incoherent. "How you could be so sure of our innocence when we ourselves . . . Oh Lord! What I mean is, if ever we can do anything for you in return for . . . for bringing us together again . . . Oh Lord! You tell him Lois. Then we must go."

Very prettily Mrs. Winchester made her thanks as they moved to the doorway. Composed, very graceful, as she shook hands with a lingering warmth that the D.O. found vaguely distasteful.

Then with a look of set purpose John Balance walked to the inverted bath, cocked his head on one side, listened.

"Good God, Balance, I forgot what I came for." Winchester's voice came from the verandah.

Balance went back to meet him.

"Got a wire to say Miss King, Culver's girl, you know, would arrive to-morrow. I'll put her up, and do all that's needed. Won't affect you now you're going. But thought you'd like to know. Good-bye once more. And thanks

awfully for everything."

"Wonder whether you'd be kind enough to send this letter to the Resident by your next lorry to Railhead? I nearly forgot it." Balance held out a large, sealed envelope.

"Many thanks. And good-bye."

CHAPTER XXXIII

A FAT, white terrier scrambled into view and sneezed. Hatasu on two knees and one hand followed. Her other hand supported the bath till it dropped with a clang behind her. Dignity appeared to forbid any attention to her dusty perspiration-streaked face and body. In stiff-legged stateliness she turned towards the door, ignoring the amused white man.

"Come, 'Tumbi! We go."

But the terrier enjoyed having his ears pulled, grinned widely, and rolled over on his broad back inviting John Balance to do a little massage of the stomach.

"Stop!" John Balance was worn by lack of sleep. His command was sharper than he intended. "Why did you hide beneath the bath? Am I the one who you think killed your Kalava?"

Hatasu twisted her short skirt-cloth straight, and her eyes narrowed. "What do I care whether it was you or another? Kalava was *banza*, a waster! But you . . . you are different. Why should you do what Kalava did?"

"Let us sit." Balance set the example. "It is not good to be angry. Anger made the elephant tread on the mouse's tail, going lame for a week later of that cause. Because of your un wisdom your meaning is not clear. What do I do, that Kalava did . . . that angers you?"

Balance's calmness, even his absurd fable of the elephant seemed to stir the slender, brown girl to further passion.

Her small stomach, below the bare, immature chest, rose and fell. She tried to speak, failed, tried again.

"I am no elephant, but a woman—or nearly one! Nor are you a mouse! You are a lion in all things save women. But as regards women you wish to be a *kura*, a hyena, as Kalava was, taking the remnants, the stale remnants left by others. You who could be lion, killing for yourself, eating untouched meat!"

"You speak in riddles, which I do not understand." Perplexity showed on the white man's face. Nor am I pleased that a child should speak of women in the manner used by minstrels and butcher's assistants."

"Me, you drive from you. Nor am I permitted to bring 'Tumbi and sleep even in the bathroom of your house. But must take my mat and sleep at a distance whilst thieves break in and try to steal, and perhaps kill you. Nor did I even know till your shot woke me . . . " Tears began to flow, increasing the havoc of perspiration and dust.

"Let us speak of 'Tumbi, who grows excessively fat from sitting too long under baths, and eating too much of the food that Hatasu should eat so that she may grow tall and strong. Such food as you ask shall always be given to you if you will but ask Amadu. Now, as regards 'Tumbi, I think . . . "

"This is no matter of dogs and food, but of the wife of the Manager—who was also the friend of Kalava! She who met us by intent, though in seeming accident, when we returned from shooting. Who talked with you, pled with you, as I could tell by the tones of her voice which I heard. Then you quarrelled—this too I heard—and she rode off in bitterness. Then you rode after her . . madly; returning torn, and on foot, but in peace. Whilst she . . .

she rode your horse. Allah show you shame, is it right that a woman should ride the horse, whilst a Chief, such as thou art, walks?"

Hatasu, accusing, wrathful, twisted her hands in the scanty awning-striped cloth around her hips. Balance's face cleared as he began to understand the problem. He lit a pipe, then pointed it admonishingly at the furious girl.

"You mix some wisdom with much folly. But how came you under the bath?"

"There is no motor save the Manager's. When I heard its sound I looked from my hut. And I saw *Her*. So I brought 'Tumbi to this further door, and looked in, seeking where I might hide. I thought you would have heard us from the verandah where you went to greet them. But *She* was speaking '*Nyi-ny-ny-ny*' as is her way, and none heard the bath scrape." Hatasu grimaced in imitation of Mrs. Winchester's speech, and was silent.

"The talk is evil, the thought foolish. Punishment is due to those who speak evil and hide under baths."

"*Yowwah!* Fine! Even though they be right, women who displease the *ubangiji*, the lord of the household, should be beaten," Hatasu nodded sagely.

"Women! You are no woman but a small girl, almost as a small boy." Balance tried hard to sound stern, but had difficulty. "As a small boy is smacked, so shall you be smacked. Even as I when young was often beaten by my elders."

Hatasu's sharp teeth bit hard into John Balance's trousered leg, but his hand rose and fell swiftly on the back of the scanty skirt. 'Tumbi opened one eye at the sound, looked mildly interested in the girl lying across the man's knees, then closed the eye again in seeming approbation.

"Now . . ." Balance released her. "In such conditions my elders would say that it hurt them more than it hurt me. But this I have never thought to be true."

Smoothing her ruffled plumage, Hatasu appeared to be weighing up the situation. One hand stole round behind, and grasping a handful of loin-cloth scrubbed at the tingling part.

"Ba-lanss, for so I will call you again, you are wise!" A cheery grin spread across her face, her eyes screwed up with amusement. "But as to the saying of your elders, it was false, or their hands were softer!"

A thorough sportsman, this little waif! The man appreciated her courage.

"*Kai!* But I'm hungry! Is that from the beating you gave me, Ba-lanss?" Her hands came round to the front again and clasped the place where the emptiness was.

"So it was sometimes when my elders beat me. Go to Amadu and eat what you wish."

"That will be good. Come 'Tumbi!" She took a half pace, looked wistfully at the door, then shook her head.

"Not yet. First there is much that I should tell. I should have told you before, but being angry could not." Rolling the waiting 'Tumbi on to his back again she squatted beside him on a mat.

"You told me of Saidu, the friend of John, who gave to the latter much money and bade him run. Then came that . . . tck! I almost forgot!" Hatasu shrugged her bare shoulders, extended one cupped hand propitiatingly towards the white man. "Then came the white woman, riding, and I hid. Having given the birds to the cook, I drank water, and sought shade where I might sit and think. I sat in the posture that *mallams* and *muftis* and other learned

men use when thinking deeply, thus . . .”

The girl placed her hands flat upon her thin thighs, and screwed her small face up into a cross-eyed scowl. For half a minute she held the pose, then relaxed and breathed freely again.

“Thinking is not difficult,” triumphantly. “Once one has closely observed those that think, and does as they do; though tiring! ‘Now,’ I said to myself, ‘Saidu, the friend of John is the same Saidu who is groom to the tall white man. That I could have told Ba-lanss, had not the white woman come riding.’ But now let me think further thoughts. ‘And I thought of the one who came in the dark to listen; the one at whom I pointed with the nose of this fat ‘Tumbi. Then I thought of Saidu, till I saw that the two were one.”

Hatasu stopped to smooth out her headcloth and retie it with deft fingers. She was enjoying her recital as much as Balance was. He ran his fingers through the loose tobacco in his pocket and waited impatiently for her to continue.

“And then? You had a thought?”

“That *was* the thought!” She looked reproachfully at the white man. “Having finished the thought I rose and sought Ladi, a girl whom Saidu seeks in marriage. ‘Come, let us tease Saidu,’ I said to her. We went, and on the road I ate some sweetmeats she had with her. I said; ‘Saidu is like all men. So I will ask him where he was on such-and-such an evening. Before he replies you will say that you saw him on that day and time walking with another man near the mosque. And if he quickly agrees that that is true you will know that he is false, as are all men, and was at that time doing that which he wishes to conceal. And we will taunt him with his falseness, till for peace he buys you

a silk head-cloth or such other thing as you desire.' Thus I spoke with Ladi."

"The thought was one of great cunning. I begin to understand."

"Thought? That was no thought. I had stopped thinking then and risen. It was just a simple plan such as any woman would make. And it happened as I planned, though Ladi, distrusting me, said 'two men' instead of one, and 'the big *chediya* tree' instead of 'mosque.' It was Saidu, then, who came in the dark to this compound; for his fear made him without pause agree that Ladi had seen him with two men by the big *chediya* tree at that time. Is the news good?"

Balance leaned over and patted the bare shoulder. Hatasu wriggled happily.

"But 'Tumbi aided me, licking my face as I sat and thought."

The white man took the hint. Leaning down further he patted the terrier with his other hand.

"But still I do not think that Saidu killed Kalava. He is big and strong, but hates nobody. Nor would he steal—though I do not know how he found the money which he gave John, for Ladi says he saves no money."

Hatasu pulled 'Tumbi on to his legs as one sets a toy upright, and sprang briskly to her feet.

"Now I am again happy, and very hungry. For all is told, and no longer does the thought of that woman trouble me . . ."

"Go, eat! But remember that this talk of women displeases me."

"I see." The girl paused for a moment in her dance to the door. "Neither to 'Tumbi nor me are women aught.

But till a few moments ago I was young, very young! *Kai!* Do all grown-ups feel such hunger as I now have?"

With the girls' dancing departure heat and weariness seemed to close down on John Balance. With obvious reluctance he dragged typewriter from its case, and rolled in a sheet of notepaper.

Slowly he wrote, but, even so, the first two attempts were torn into fine shreds and piled on a corner of the table. He lit another pipe and tried again.

With set face and greater certainty he wrote. The typewriter roller snarled as he spun the sheet out and began to read it.

"There is a matter of importance that I should like to discuss with you. If you can come down while it is still light, bring your pistols. I remember our talking of a little target shooting, and this is the last chance we shall have together."

Five minutes later the note still lay on the table, John Balance still gazed at it in unseeing indecision.

The click of "Tumbi's nails on the hard floor announced his return with Hatasu.

"We have eaten. Whilst eating I considered this matter of your dislike. First I thought it was because you wished to be a bachelor, a womanless man, which would have been a thing of shame. But now I understand that it is perhaps a matter of *ibada* of a thing of great merit, a vow. There was a recluse, a hermit, with such vows, a very holy man, knowing all the Koran and the Hadasi . . ."

Balance read through the note once more, folded it, addressed it.

"I spoke with Amadu and the cook. Both say that you have money for many wives. Therefore I know that it is

from desire for holiness, perhaps because of a vow, and not of necessity, that you scorn women."

No traces of amusement showed on the white man's face. He held out the letter. Hatasu, puzzled, took it in her rather grubby paw.

"Since women are thus to you, I am glad that I am yet no woman. Amadu moreover agrees that I shall aid him in sweeping your floors if you permit. Now as to this paper?"

"Paper? . . . Yes the paper." John Balance looked up and seemed to notice the child for the first time. "Tell Amadu to send it at once to the tall white man of the Mine, he who is called Paige-Thomas."

CHAPTER XXXIV

“**N**O horseboy! Nothin’ for it, but walkin’. Hope I’m not too late. I’ve brought along three ‘guns.’”

“Lord! I’m sorry, Paige-Thomas! I should have remembered to send you my pony.” Balance ducked under the grass eave, and came down the verandah steps. “I’m afraid your Saidu is in the village lock-up by now. I heard they collared him this morning. Shall we get straight on to the shooting while there is enough light? I’ve rigged the targets up in front of a giant ant-heap, had the scrub cleared away in front of it, and two tables put up for stands.”

Amadu sought to relieve Paige-Thomas of the leather attaché case he carried. The tall white man thanked him but declined the assistance.

“Toss for stands? What is it . . . Sorry, it’s tails. I’ll take the right hand table. Ordinary fixed targets to start with?” Balance turned and gave some instructions to Amadu.

The sun was already pleasantly low. The two white men at their adjoining tables set about their preparations with deft-handed speed. Paige-Thomas’ houseboy had appeared, and was helping Amadu and Balance’s horseboy with the targets.

The evening breeze began to flutter the leaves on the bushes to each side of the twenty-five yards range. Balance opened the front of his bush-shirt. Paige-Thomas, more formally dressed, took off his tussore-silk jacket, threw it over a chair, and rolled up his sleeves.

"You wrote that you had somethin' serious to discuss, Balance."

Paige-Thomas had laid out two revolvers in their holsters, and, bending down was unwinding a strip of flannelette from a long barreled target pistol. He dropped the coil of cloth back into the attaché case and kicked the lid closed with his foot.

"If it's anythin' I can help in," his drawl was more pronounced than ever, "just flap the face and tell me!"

"You could help, of course. A lot. But it would be unfair to ask your help. Is that your Webley-Fosbery that you're loading? Then may I look at this one?"

Paige-Thomas had taken both revolvers from their holsters. Without waiting for a reply to his question, Balance picked one up, and began to examine it.

"Put it down!" Paige-Thomas spoke sharply. "It may be loaded."

"Yes, it's loaded. But I shouldn't care to fire it. You see it has something in the barrel." Balance held it by the barrel in his left hand, his eyes not on the pistol, but on its owner. He made no sign of returning it.

"This revolver that I have my hand on is also loaded, Balance. Accidents sometimes occur, and one is going to occur now, Balance. Unless" the voice was still languid, "you have the sense to hand back that old Colt of mine. I am purposely not raising my voice. Nor must you raise yours. For if I take up this revolver, and it happens to go off and kill you, I want your servants and mine to give evidence that there were no raised voices, no signs of quarrelling. Don't you think I'm right?"

Balance showed no trace of surprise. Still his left hand held the barrel of the Colt, still his right hand was inside

his shirt, comfortably scratching at imaginary heat-rash. Still he watched Paige-Thomas.

"You're right that natives shouldn't hear white men quarrel, or even seem to quarrel. But I don't think you're right about the accident. I've never had an accident with a firearm in my life. And I'd hate to have one at my death! In some ways I'm unusually careful."

Balance's right hand came out from his shirt. He held it towards Paige-Thomas. Something short, squat, blued, lay in it.

"Have you seen this absurd kind of pistol called a der-ringer? Take your hand away from the table and go round and stand in front of it. This holds just one round of rather heavy ammunition, and barrel and grip are both much too short for accurate shooting. But I didn't bring it for target practice this afternoon; just to guard against . . well . . accidents."

With his left hand Balance contrived to swing out the chambers of the Colt. Still with his eyes on Paige-Thomas his left hand ejected the ammunition on the table, groped about for a cleaning rod, fitted it to the muzzle.

"It's all very puzzlin'. But you seem serious."

"As serious as you were a moment ago. Ah . . ."

A tightly rolled paper was forced from the barrel. With his left hand Balance flattened it out on the table.

"Would you mind walking down as if to look at the targets, Paige-Thomas? I'll keep you in range of my Luger here." Balance laid down the derringer and patted his heavy, long-barrelled automatic. "I want a minute to look at this photo that I've uncovered."

Paige-Thomas strolled nonchalantly down the cleared space, chatted with the servants a moment, kicked at the red

cement-like ant-hill as if to test its ability to stop bullets.

"Everythin's in order here." Balance heard the other's voice.

"Right. Then let's start. You won't mind my sending off this note to Winchester?" John Balance changed to Hausa "Here, Amadu, take this swiftly to the Manager, stopping nowhere on the way."

Paige-Thomas, approaching, watched with expressionless face whilst the District Officer drew a blank envelope from his trouser pocket and enclosed the photo. Faint surprise showed when from the same pocket appeared a note, ready written, addressed to Winchester. Without comment, he watched Amadu hurry off.

Balance, heavy automatic in his right hand, with his left reached out and handed his guest a pair of binoculars.

"Would you mind keeping both hands on these glasses, and spotting my shots? I'd like you to stand a little further from the firearms, too, for a moment. Awfully discourteous my taking first turn in this way, but I want that photo to be well on its way to Winchester's safe before you hold a pistol."

"That's all right!" Paige-Thomas waived the point. "Fire away before the light goes. Your finding the photo like that might be accidental, but I'm puzzled how you came to have the envelope and covering letter to Winchester all ready to hand."

Balance fired, and lowered his arm.

"Four inches low, about. At seven o'clock," Paige-Thomas announced.

"I found the mounting of a photo outside Culver's hut. It had the name and address of a Chelmsford firm of photographers. A photograph of a girl, Miss King apparently,

taken by the same photographers, was among Culver's papers. So it was a fairly safe guess that the first photograph was of Miss King—probably a Christmas present to her fiancée. As soon as I was convinced that it was you who had killed Culver . . . ”

John Balance fired again.

“Better. Same position, a bit closer in.”

“Thanks. As soon as I knew you'd killed him, it seemed a fair guess that you had taken the photo and left the frame. Knowing something of your history, I didn't think you would be scared into destroying it. But I didn't think I should be smart enough to discover it by means of a search warrant. Fixing up a plan to make you produce it wasn't as hard as it might sound, since your mind seems to work almost exactly on the lines mine does.”

“I take that as a compliment.” Another crack interrupted Paige-Thomas' remark. “And that's a bull of the finest breed! Good man!”

“Of course I got you to verify that you had lived near Chelmsford. You remember I even pretended to deduce that Marren came from Ireland! I went through the Company records, and could only find that you gave your London bankers as forwarding address. So I had to go through that long disquisition on the art of detection and get you to confirm my guess.”

“Another bull, slightly high.” Paige-Thomas lowered the glasses again. “If it's not too distractin' to your shootin', tell me how you made me produce the photo.”

“I warned you at Marren's house that I knew the murderer. That was to make you expect some move on my part. To-day, after you had left the office, I sent *dogaris* to appear as though they wished to be unrecognised, and to

enquire when you would leave your house. By this and other details they were to appear as though they wished to search your hut when you left it. It seemed to me very unlikely that you would have put the photo in the office, or by some scheme have passed it into the possession of some other white man. I didn't think it very likely that you would hide it in your house. Your safest plan up to that point would have been to keep it always with you in your pocket book. The threat of search of your house by *dogaris* was partly to ensure that you kept the photo with you, but still more to make you feel that the net was closing in on you."

"May I interrupt to say that your last two shots were just off the bull at three o'clock."

"The idea that occurred to me was that in such circumstances I should want the photo with me, in a place that would not be easily suspected, and where it could be instantaneously destroyed. It seemed to me only the barrel of a pistol fulfilled these conditions. So, assuming that your mind would work as mine did, I built up the predisposing causes, put pistols in your mind by asking you to come and shoot, hoped to add to the feeling that the net was closing in by speaking of a 'serious matter' for discussion—and looked for the photo in the revolver that had a large enough bore and was already loaded. Though before actually looking down the barrel I let you verify my guess by demanding with threats the return of the pistol."

"My only comment is the old adage 'The proof of the puddin' is in the eatin.' You have now punched the centre out of your target, your magazine is empty, and I can safely take up my own pistol." Paige-Thomas placed the binoculars on the table and took up his Webley-Fosbery. "Shall

"I kill you, or show you how to shoot?"

"Either would be interesting. Do whichever appeals."

"Then kindly stand away from the weapons—including this time your little derringer—and mark for me with the glasses."

Paige-Thomas' voice was calm and level. If reason told him to kill he would do so as politely as he would offer a cigarette in his melancholy, off-hand manner. This John Balance knew. But he neither hoped nor feared. Only, he took pains to make no quick, suspicious movement.

"Y' know Balance I'm interested. It isn't often that one gets a chance to listen to a man tryin' to persuade one that one's committed a murder. You can go on tellin' me while I shoot. But don't forget there's a bullet waitin' for you all the time in case you forget and try to grab a gun Where'd that one go?"

"Low, slightly left. Same position as my first."

"What first set you sleuthin' me?"

"We discussed why I thought Culver's death was no accident, and why I thought . . . same position as my second shot . . . it must have been the work of a white man. I marked down the Europeans pretty carefully, and it seemed to me that only you, I, or Winchester were capable of doing the murder and acting a part of innocence sufficiently well afterwards. I first worked on the presumption that it was Winchester. I had practically nothing to go on, you must remember."

"But there was a possible motive, and that funny business about the ammunition he gave to Culver, or said he did?"

"Yes, but motive counted most, till I found he thought Mrs. Winchester had done it. By the by, your last two

shots are bulls. Then you puzzled me at the Inquest by saying that you couldn't tell whether that cartridge in Culver's revolver had been fired by heat or human agency. The cap of the ammunition, you remember had a pimple corresponding to the hole through which the hammer strikes, not a dent such as the hammer would have made if a man had pressed the trigger. Since you were a bit of an expert on arms, I couldn't believe that you did not know this. Why did you hide the fact which would have weakened the *prima facie* case against Winchester? It was suspicious."

"It was! But I won't explain. Nor will I interrupt by protestin' my innocence. You're much too interestin'. Carry on."

"Whichever white man killed Culver, it was just about inevitable that his servants should have been accomplices in some degree. They must have known that their master was away for a few minutes at the time the murder was done. Yet no servants when questioned would admit this. Though they must have known that they were taking considerable risk in faking evidence. This implied that they not only . . . well, shall we say 'loved' their master, but also had the greatest confidence in his judgment. I looked for servants who had been with the same master a long time. Your household was the only one. I looked for a master who could inspire his servants with this feeling towards him. Again I found only one. You."

"That, Balance, is the highest compliment I have ever had paid me. Too high a compliment unless proving that I am a murderer proves its truth. Which would make it an amusin' contrast! Here goes my last shot!"

The tall man fired.

"Pulled to the right I'm afraid? Why don't you grab your other pistol in self-defence, Balance, now you've got the chance?" Paige-Thomas swung his empty Webley by the trigger-guard. "I hoped you would grab a pistol. Then I should have pretended to rush you, and been killed. Just a little shooting accident, which you could have explained. And people would have forgotten about who killed Cock Robin—I mean Culver."

CHAPTER XXXV

IN turn they demolished swinging cans, and as long as the light lasted made excellent practise on the extemporised running rabbit target worked on long strings by the servants. Then returning to the rest-house, Balance poured drinks and drew the two deck chairs up to the table.

To the west the sky was turning a deeper red. The little white cow-birds winged back from the pasturing cattle, and started the usual fussy disputes over their night's lodgings. But their angry cackling seemed only to emphasise the peace and stillness of the evening. On the soft breeze the voices of the servants at the back of the house came as a relaxed, pleasant murmuring. The murderer, and the District Officer lay back in their long chairs, and cleaning their firearms, taking occasional sips of their whiskies and sodas.

"As soon as you were clearly fixed in my mind as the man I was looking for, a number of other things fitted in. Your forced march back to Mafun Mine. Not because you were afraid of missing the Christmas festivities—everyone knows you hate social shows. And besides, you knew when Christmas day would fall, but had been making no attempt to reach the mine in time. In fact up to the day your mail reached you, you had been killing time, probably with the expressed intention of being late for Christmas and missing the boring social event. You obviously hurried to be in time to see Culver before he left to get married. You received your first news of his plans the day before you started

double-trekking. Or else it was then that you discovered who Miss King was."

Balance, re-assembling his Luger, was silent for a while. Paige-Thomas leant forward and borrowed the cleaning-rod.

"I don't know whether a letter from home gave you some news of Miss King, made you remember her as a friend of your childhood, or whether you already knew her, and a letter from someone in the Mine told you for the first time that Culver was leaving so early. Perhaps I can discover that later. I shall have to try, as it will be almost essential to establish your motive for the murder. Probably your knowledge of Culver's utter beastliness made you decide that at all costs you must prevent him marrying Miss King for whom you had a regard, a devotion, perhaps . . ."

"If we could leave her out of this I'd be very grateful, Balance. We grew up together, as you guessed by coupling my admission that I lived near Chelmsford with the address on her photograph. But if you could do without further details, it would be a kindly act on your part."

"I'll do what I can, but I can't promise. It may be necessary to prove motive . . ."

"It won't!" Paige-Thomas lit a cigarette. The banal action, the calmness of his speech added to, instead of detracting from the gravity of the situation. They showed his intention of keeping things in a casual matter-of-fact plane. With an effort, Balance followed his lead.

"As far as I could see, your sending Saidu to John, and arranging for John to disappear was for the same reason as your concealing the fact that the last round in Culver's revolver had not been fired by hand. You had no intention of making either Winchester or John your scapegoat, but wanted to use them to distract me from your trail. You

knew, or guessed, that if I followed up too many false scents I should find that I had to drop the investigation and trek on to my other work. I'm not a C.I.D. man but more like a maid-of-all-work, with taxes to collect by a fixed date, roads to make, returns to submit and so on."

Paige-Thomas, the prospect of arrest and perhaps the gallows before him, smiled his melancholy smile.

"Somethin' like that occurred to me, Balance. I even knew that you had some cattle-liftin' and mild fightin' going on in the south-east corner of your Division. An Augean Stable that the maid-of-all-work would have to get down on his knees to scrub!"

"I don't know if you had anything to do with Saidu's visit to me here, one evening. He skulked about after dark, but rather pointlessly. I think, though, that an anonymous letter sent to Kaduna with the intention of getting me called off the scent was your work. They will send the original for me to try to trace. I doubt if I shall be able to trace it further than it was written on your office paper and your office typewriter, which won't be very conclusive. Winchester or any one of several clerks could equally easily have written it. Saidu's disappearance on your horse will probably be found to be by your orders. Neither you, nor anyone else here, knew that the cordon had been laid, and that he would be caught so soon."

"I'm arrangin' that Saidu and my other boys shall tell you all they know. It wouldn't be fair for the poor devils to suffer." Paige-Thomas struck a match and squinted down the long barrel of his target pistol. "But I'll have to rely on you to do what you can to save them from the consequences of their master's idiocy."

Amadu brought out a lamp, and collected the pistols that

his master had cleaned. John Balance attended to the glasses again.

"I followed up all the data I could get on the other white men. Their alibis seemed all right, as far as one could tell, but some of them behaved rather strangely."

"Marren particularly! He told me all about his attempt to burgle you, and accused me of leading him into it. Though it so happens that I hadn't thought of it, I simply got a bit of idle amusement out of settin' him and Kartel arguin'. If I had time, I'd ask you how you caught him."

"Marren wasn't the only trouble. The Winchesters both seemed deeply involved. It was only when I found they were trying most carefully to hide their suspicions of each other that I could cross them off the list of suspects. Bennerton was next on the list of 'possibles' who needed investigation, when things pointed so definitely at you that I left all the other trials, and concentrated on yours. There was nothing against Bennerton, unless you can count his being young, impressionable and excitable as points against him. They were against him, I suppose, as long as the murder seemed motiveless, perhaps half accidental."

Balance took a drink and lit his pipe. It was a strange interview. But if P.T. liked it handled that way, calmly, impersonally . . . He had admired the debonair, non-chalant ex-officer since the day they had met and ridden in together. The day when, as yet, no murder had been committed. He had penetrated a little beneath the casual, almost insolent air, and recognised the will-power and ability that lay beneath.

"It was amusin' tryin' to keep in touch with your moves without your guessin'," Paige-Thomas broke the awkward silence that was developing. "That was why I sent Saidu

down to your compound to listen in on you. But you gave him the scare of his life. He didn't think you had spotted him, or somethin'. Why did you cross off Sayles so early, though?"

"Sayles? Who is Sayles?" Balance sounded puzzled.

"The man who only came in for the one night. Works on the dredge about ten miles to the east of the main camp."

"Lord A'mighty! D' you know . . . I forgot him!"

Paige-Thomas lay back and laughed. Laughed till he spilt whiskey on his knee, till Balance joined in.

"Varsity educations seem to have been poor trainin' for our respective careers, Balance!" He mopped at his trousers with a handkerchief. "You're as slipshod a sleuth as I am murderer! Too late to use him as a red-herrin' now I suppose? . . . I was afraid so!"

"The thing that puzzled me, and still puzzles me is that you should have used poison. I'm pretty sure you did, because of the gummy deposit in the glasses. Why in two glasses? Did you try to poison yourself too? I'd have betted a hundred to one that you would have shot him, strangled him if you needed to do it silently, crushed his skull in or something like that rather than poison him. Poison suggests stealth, deceit. The granular powder in the native snuff box leaves a similar deposit, as far as I can tell with a magnifying glass, so I think I'm right in my guess that you did poison him. I'm not trying to extract a confession," Balance was apologetic, "I'm simply telling you the weak link in my chain."

"You look quite upset at catchin' your criminal, Balance. Cheer up! I'm the one who should be gnashin' his teeth." Paige-Thomas finished cleaning his Webley-Fosbery, took

up his Colt as if to start on it, then replaced it on the table. "Two hours ago I thought I was safe, though I knew you had marked me down. Now, there's only your signature on a warrant for arrest between me and the local 'birdcage' or House of Chains as the native calls it."

"To-morrow morning at the latest I'll have to sign the warrant. I'm damned sorry P.T. . . . Culver deserved what he got . . ."

"An' I deserve what I'm gettin'. So don't worry. It's your job. And if I was fool enough to underestimate your intelligence, and so get caught . . . What of it? Whose fault is it but mine. May I have another drink? I seldom have more than two, but as this is a special occasion . . ."

He stretched out a long arm and helped himself.

Casually, appreciatively, he sipped the beginning of his third drink. The District Officer, his whiskey neglected on the ground beside him sat hunched up, elbows on knees, chin in his hands.

"Amusin' to think how close we came to killin' each other this evenin'. I'd have shot you rather than let you have the photo, and you'd have shot me rather than hand it back. War and the Tropics makes one consider life rather unimportant, I suppose."

John Balance still sat staring into the darkness. Paige-Thomas closed his eyes as though to enjoy the peace and cool of the evening.

Balance sat up, looked wearily around him, groped for his glass and drank.

"Here's the situation, P.T., as far as I can sum it up. There's a *prima facie* case against you. In other words, grounds for arrest. The evidence against you that I've already mentioned has gone off to my Resident. I typed

out my report last night and gave it to Winchester this afternoon. The photo is in Winchester's safe. Glasses, bottle, native snuff box, and other things I found outside Culver's hut are all sealed up in one of my trunks beneath Culver's papers. All this will have to be placed at the disposal of the Crown prosecutor. But—and this is the important point—no judge sitting without a jury, as they do in this country, will convict on this evidence. You can never guess what a jury will do, but thank heaven we're clear of that complication. D' you follow?"

"Awfully good of you to trouble, Balance," Paige-Thomas gave his rare, charming smile. "But I've got a simpler solution."

"Hell, no! Try mine first. Having done my bare duty in submitting this data, I wash my hands of the whole business. A strafeing I received to-day as a result of your anonymous letter affords me a sufficient excuse to get out of it, and it's absolutely essential that I do. I know too much. I could get the evidence that would hang you."

"How? Go on, you interestin' man!"

"The place where you started your double-trekking to reach Culver in time was probably the place where you first laid your plans, hence where you bought, or first tried to buy the poison. It's native vegetable poison of some sort. Imported drugs would be too carefully prepared in the process of manufacture to show traces of fibre as this does when examined under a magnifying glass. It may even be *gwaska*, sasswood . . . Gosh! That would explain the two glasses . . ." The District Officer got up hastily, strode backwards and forwards, visibly excited. "But I'm getting off the point. If I remained in charge of the case, I'd start my enquiries for the poison at that place. You

know how natives in lonely hamlets remember for years afterwards the last white man who passed through, and all he did, what he paid for his food and so on. They wouldn't forget so unusual an incident as your buying the poison, whatever pretext you gave them."

Balance came to rest in front of the chair, sat down, reached for another drink.

"Your boys would tell me everything once you're arrested. Partly because I know their language, partly because I've got a sort of reputation . . ."

"Sort of reputation' is good!" Paige-Thomas interrupted the halting explanation. "They look upon you as a cross between Iblis and the nurse that spansks them when they're naughty. *Shafo*—the Hawk—the ubiquitous and imminent threat to all malefactors has certainly a 'sort of a reputation'."

"Well, you see there's quite a good chance of a legal luminary from the south who doesn't understand natives or their speech or even their poisons, missing a lot of the points I could dig up against you. The Commissioner of Police who would prepare the case for the Supreme Court—it would be transferred there from the Provincial Court I expect—would be almost as much a stranger to the people and as much at a disadvantage as the counsel for the prosecution."

Paige-Thomas smiled again at the D.O.'s earnestness. All through this evening he gave the impression of being relaxed, happy, at peace with the world. Balance exasperated, found himself unable to pierce the armour of contentment. Was it courage or conceit that blinded him to the gravity of his situation?

"You're bein' amazin'ly decent about it all Balance.

There's an explanation I'd like you to hear. Partly to justify myself a bit, partly to confirm your guess about the *gwaska*. You were on to it when you mentioned the two glasses."

"Not ordeal by poison, such as the natives use to try suspected wizards . . . Good Lord! And you took the test too!"

Paige-Thomas from where he sat, idly threw a pebble at the quarrelling cow-birds in their tree. "He wasn't worth arguments or threats, or shootin'. Poison's good enough for vermin. But when I came to do the trick I poisoned my own whiskey as well. As I thought I'd doped one glass more heavily than the other, and wanted to be fair, I gave him the weaker one."

Idly Paige-Thomas picked another pebble off the ground, and tossed it into the tree. A clamour of renewed scoldings came from the little white birds invisible in the darkness. It seemed to exhaust their present store of ill-nature. Gradually their cackling faded into silence.

John Balance waited, sucking a dead pipe, too interested to notice its condition.

"You know in more detail than I do the charmin' way the more primitive natives used to settle their disputes. Accuser and accused bein' given poison to drink, the one that died bein' later judged guilty? Of course Culver wouldn't have consented had he known. But he didn't know. We both drank. I had time to wonder what dyin' felt like. Wondered what Culver could say if I told him what was happenin'. Tried to remember whether it was the natives' ancestors, or their pagan gods that were supposed to do the decidin'. Then . . .

"Balance, have you ever been so sick that you couldn't

stand? I just reached some bushes before it happened, then I thought all my insides were comin' out! As soon as I could walk I staggered to Winchester's verandah, pulled myself together and walked in. There wasn't time to go back to see what had happened to Culver. I hadn't any idea how long I'd been in the bushes. I wanted to build up my alibi, such as it was. And God! I was cold. Slipped myself a glass of neat whiskey when no one was lookin'. Wondered how long it would be before people noticed there was somethin' wrong with me, and gradually began to feel better. Then you came in creatin' a welcome diversion. I still don't know how the fire started."

"Like a lot of native customs, the trial by poison ordeal is based, probably unconsciously, on sound psychology. The man with right on his side has confidence in the justice of the gods, and swills the poison freely. The native who has put up a false claim tries to drink as little as possible. The false claimant dies." The District Officer pulled himself up from his favourite hobby of native customs. "That's what happened in the trial between you and Culver. If you had not tried to be over-fair, and so drunk the stronger dose yourself, Culver would have been alive and you dead!"

"I don't get your meanin'."

"Awfully simple. *Gwaska*, sasswood, is only one of a lot of poisons that work that way. Take a little and you die. Take a lot, and it acts as an emetic before it can be absorbed into the system. Consider your trial by ordeal as a test, and you escape the vindication of the justice of your act, illegal as it was. Anyway listen to reason . . . Your chances at present are about two to one on getting hanged. If I withdraw from the prosecution I'd lay five to one on your being acquitted . . ."

"Oh Lord!" Paige-Thomas groaned in simulated boredom. "Just when you were gettin' interestin' about native customs, you hark back to this dull business of gettin' me out of a scrape . . ."

"Motive for the crime is the point the prosecution are going to get most stuck on. I'll issue a warrant for your arrest to-morrow morning—I was going to anyway—and have you taken to Railhead under escort. There's only a goal for natives here. That will take you out of the way. I'd intended to trek off to-morrow morning anyway, so that deals with me. The Commissioner of Police, whom they'll have to send up to prepare the case, won't be likely to arrive for at least a fortnight." John Balance looked hopefully across at the murderer's impassive face. "So that will clear everyone off the scene for a fortnight. Women can conceal pretty nearly anything. And if she's got any sense, from the moment she arrives to-morrow Miss King will . . ."

"Miss King? To-morrow! But Winchester telegraphed to stop her! Can't you do anything? Wire again? Pull up a bridge? Tell her the road is too dangerous? . . ." Gropingly Paige-Thomas rose from his chair, stumbled a few paces into the darkness. "Do something for God's sake, don't just sit there. Poor little . . .," his voice trailed off.

"Don't worry, she'll have no excuse to stay more than a week at the outside, and everyone will be as decent as they can be to her. So decent that she will want to get away from the gush of sympathy and inquisitiveness just as soon as she can. And . . .," John Balance became businesslike again, "there will be no one to connect her with the death of Culver, no one to piece together the motive for the killing. The C. of P. as I say, isn't likely to arrive for a fort-

night; a full week, I expect, after she has gone . . . ”

“That’s all right. Don’t worry!” Paige-Thomas drifted back into the lamplight, patted the D.O. sympathetically on the back. “I must be goin’ now. Got a lot to do to-night.” He collected his pistols and replaced them in the attaché case.

“Don’t . . . ,” anxiety was in Balance’s voice.

“Don’t worry!” Paige-Thomas smiled his melancholy mocking smile. But a tender note crept into his voice. “I’ll have to say good-bye. Wish we could have met earlier.”

“Or later!” Balance summoned a smile with difficulty. He held out his hand, “Good-bye. I’ll do all I can for Miss King.”

“I know you will. Good-bye!”

John Balance stood listening to the crisp, departing footsteps, to the debonair little tune, till the last faint whistle faded away into the darkness.

CHAPTER XXXVI

FOR an hour after Paige-Thomas' departure, John Balance had done his best to drive the problem from his mind. An hour during which he had bathed, eaten his light dinner and changed into pyjamas and dressing-gown. An hour during which the burden of weariness had pressed upon him like a *peine forte et dure* and nightmares of anxiety had enveloped him, been driven off, to return again interminably.

The effort had been a severe one. At the end of the meal Amadu without comment had laid quinine and aspirin, the remedies for malaria, before him. To avoid disappointing the well-meaning servant Balance had managed to swallow a tablet of each, and ordered the bottles and a glass of water to be placed by his bedside.

When the last clicking dish had been washed on the verandah, Amadu had appeared from the darkness to ask for next morning's orders. So easy, it would have been, to order Alhassan to be saddled, to gallop up through the darkness to where Paige-Thomas would be sitting, writing. To sit with him through the long night, dissuade him from his intention. In the last resort to place him under arrest forthwith and so deprive him of opportunity. So easy, it would have been. Such a relief. Justifiable too, in the name of duty. But friendship, even justice required that he should not interfere.

Amadu, patiently waiting, had enquired again as to orders. Had been told that they would leave Mafun in the morning. Had enquired at what hour the carriers would

arrive, and disappeared again into the darkness.

It was cool outside the house, cool, dark but for the glow of his lamp, and pleasantly silent. Pulling his dressing-gown around him, John Balance sat down to the typewriter. The preliminary report might as well be written now. There would be no time in the morning. He addressed it to his Resident, and then paused to consider. Yes, it would have to be dated December 30th, as though written tomorrow.

The keys rattled a moment, then ceased. With an effort Balance forced himself to continue. It was no doubt part of the nightmare of weariness and worry, that the regular beat of the type should sound like the clatter of a machine-gun. A machine-gun which for some inscrutable cause he must keep trained on a friend who stood there in the open, debonair, ruthless to himself, scorning to take cover. Smiling his melancholy smile the tall man was insisting that he, John Balance, District Officer, must do his duty, keep his trigger pressed. Even as the smile ceased, and the body collapsed, the sights must be dropped and the body riddled as it lay. That was mercy, hastening the end . . .

Worn out by strain and lack of sleep, John Balance pitched forward. His face struck the typewriter. For a moment came a glimmer of consciousness. He must go, quickly, quickly, run ahead, telling them to follow with his horse. It was early, it could not be all over yet. There was yet time. If he hurried! Hurried!

But legs and arms would not move. Only part of his mind was awake. The rest of him was traitor, was betraying a friend to death.

Then his last faint consciousness left him, and he slept.

Balance awoke in the dark. His lamp was out, and, by

the feel of the air, dawn was not far off. His joints seemed to creak with stiffness as he lifted head and arms from typewriter and table, hunched himself back into the chair.

A hurricane lamp held by a red-robed shape bobbed about in front of him. The voice that had roused him from sleep called again, "It is I, Shamaki. Wake, oh wake!"

"It is finished?" Only a croak represented the words. Balance repeated in a whisper, dull, hopeless, but audible. "It is finished?"

"His days are ended. Allah have mercy upon the tall white man!"

"*Amin!* . . . You were there?"

"We did as ordered. After dark he called his servants, and gave to each of them money, a paper telling the character, and dismissed them from his service with courtesy and advice. For Saidu, who is in prison as we know, he left money in the hands of the houseboy.

"Then, behind the closed door his light burned for a long time, hour after hour. Hour after hour, even after his servants had ended their discussion of his strange doings, and at last sought sleep. We too were puzzled till Sulai Yola said, 'This matter is clear. To-morrow by the grace of *Shafu*, this white man leaves the country, never to return.' Even then we did not understand, but waited as you ordered."

The *dogari*, young, excited, did not realise that he used John Balance's nickname. Balance made no comment, but mechanically took the letter from the typewriter.

"Hour after hour we waited, and the light still shone through the window. Then, perhaps half an hour ago, the white man opened the door, and called '*Dogari!*' It was not in your orders what we should do. But he called with

assurance, as one knowing we were there, and knowing we should answer. So we answered, both, and went to him."

John Balance fumbled for a pen, in the faint light of the hurricane lantern, and glancing for a moment at the typed letter, signed it.

"He gave a letter into my hands, telling me to bring it to you. Also he gave me a shilling, which I have here." Shamaki displayed the coin openly in his palm. "And the letter is" . . . He put down the lamp, the better to explore his pockets. "Tck! I have forgotten it! Grant me forgiveness, and I will hurry and at once return with it . . ."

"No matter; tell me the rest."

"Then we waited, whispering to each other, asking whether one of us dare bring you this letter, since such was not in your orders. And while we disputed we heard a shot from within the hut. The door was unlocked, and, followed by the servants—Sulai, I think, roused them—we entered. Upon the pillow were brains of the tall white man, and two teeth. He was warm, but no longer living. He lay on the bed, and a pistol of many shots such as white men use had fallen to the floor."

Shamaki waited for an exclamation of surprise, for questions. But none came. Surely the white man could not have heard properly?

"The tall white man whose house we watched is dead, having killed himself . . ."

"That is known to me." Balance cut short a repetition of the account. "Here is a report, already written, of his death." Balance folded it and placed it in an envelope. "Take it to the Manager, in order that he may send it by motor at dawn to the Resident. Touch nothing in the room of the dead man. Having changed my clothes, I will come

up and order what else shall be done. Go!"

"*Dan Fodio!*" the *dogari* invoked in a whisper. "Did *Shafu* himself pass at night, invisible, and kill? How else should he know?" His wobbling lamp showed the panic-stricken speed of his departure.

Darkness closed in around John Balance. From the distant village a fluting whistle announced the approach of his carriers. Amadu had risen, and the clink of plates within the house showed that he was already packing. In a moment Amadu must be told that they would not trek to-day, that the carriers might return to the village. Al-hassan, though, must be saddled at once.

Inquest and funeral must be hastened. Must be over if possible before Miss King's arrival. The feeling of finality, that all was ended, made the thought of future action difficult. An absurd game of pretence. He had killed Paige-Thomas as surely as if he had crept upon him and shot him in his sleep. The insouciant, drawling, yet vital P.T. Not so vital now!

No sense of tragic sorrow came as a relief in which to wallow. No hysterical dread at having killed a man gave him a feeling of drama to support him: He had killed too often. Only a cold cloud of self-contempt enveloped him, racked him, paralysed him.

Something warm pressed against his knee. His down-groping hand encountered nose and eyes, a small face. Softly John Balance patted the close-plaited head. Hatasu, lonely in the darkness, pressed more closely, and passed on the comforting patting to Maitumbi.

A faint movement, an eddying of the air, told the District Officer of the coming of another day. Another tropical day. Inquest . . . Burial . . . but not too near to Culver.